

Dual Discursive Authority and Construction of Female Subjectivity in Bai Fengxi's *The Women Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary gender perspectives in theater study primarily focus on macro-level gender issues through socio-cultural lenses or interpret drama via gender-focused literary theories. While both approaches have advanced the field, the former overlooks the micro-level of narrative—the foundation for expressing gender ideology—and the latter inadequately addresses the inherent theatricality of drama texts. To examine the relationship between dramatic narrative and gender ideology, this study utilizes Bai Fengxi's Chinese New Period classic, *The Women Trilogy*, as a representative case. The study investigates how the female playwright negotiates narrative authority and constructs female subjectivity through narrative practices. Building upon feminist narratology, this research adapts and extends traditional narratological concepts to theatrical elements. The analysis reveals that discursive authority within the trilogy manifests as a dual structure comprising positional authority, stemming from socio-structural identities and familial ethical hierarchies, and epistemic authority, derived from individual experiences and cognition. Although women's positional authority is restricted within patriarchal structures, epistemic authority enables women's silence to function as a theatrical action of resistance, transforming personal dilemmas into collective political expression. Female subjectivity is constructed through the negotiation of these two authorities. At the theoretical level, the study expands the boundaries of feminist narratology by applying it to dramatic texts. By drawing upon the theory's capacity to simultaneously encompass narrative forms and ideological dimensions, this research also provides a novel perspective for the gender and political research of drama, moving beyond prevalent macro-level socio-cultural and purely literary approaches.

1. Introduction

Integrating gender perspectives has catalyzed multidimensional shifts in theater, endowing classical plays with novel interpretive dimensions (Reimers, 2024) and providing empirical data to scrutinize power imbalances within the ecosystem (Gümüş & Biber Vangölü, 2024). Disciplinary research primarily advances through recovering omitted female experiences in theater history and employing interdisciplinary lenses in feminist criticism to expose macroscopic power inequalities. However, studies focusing on the playwright's micro-level narrative practices within the playscript remain inadequate. Since structural narrative is fundamental to understanding dramatic texts (Richardson, 2007), examining these practices is essential to elucidate how drama constructs and negotiates gender power.

Existing research bridging narrative studies and gender perspectives in drama typically leans toward either "social narrative" or "literary narrative," overlooking the playscript's inherent role in the performing arts. Social narrative studies treat dramatic texts merely as socio-historical mirrors, prioritizing ideological content over the narrative forms actualizing these expressions, whereas literary approaches analyze playscripts through traditional literary frameworks—rooted in drama's historical subordination to English departments (Aston, 1995)—neglecting implied theatricality. However, the theatricality that inheres in dialogic logic and stage directions rather than physical productions (Fabian, 1999) reflects the text's function as a performance blueprint, emphasizing the methodology essential for studying playscripts as drama rather than pure literature (Puchner, 2002). Consequently, the prevailing absence of a drama-centric narrative perspective in existing studies represents a significant research gap.

In this study, women's drama refers to drama written by female playwrights. Narrative analysis of playscripts is central to study women's drama from gender perspectives, revealing how drama functions as a public sphere to articulate female experiences and examine specific social ideologies (Farkas, 2019). However, research remains trapped in the aforementioned binary, neglecting micro-level narrative analyses and separating the narrative form and ideological content. Thus, a further gap remains in exploring how female playwrights utilize narrative practices to articulate gender politics—specifically, negotiating discursive authority and constructing female subjectivity.

Feminist narratology, linking narrative forms with gender ideologies, therefore provides an effective theoretical framework to address these gaps. As a core concept in this framework, discursive authority—encompassing a narrative's intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value (Lanser, 1992)—generates power effects that turn information into "truth" (Aswar et al., 2026), meaning that greater authority translates to stronger discursive power. Thus, investigating this concept is fundamental to examining narrative power relations, making it one of the core perspectives of this study.

1.1. Research Objectives

To address the identified gaps, this study examines women's drama in the early Chinese New Period (post-Mao era), an era of profound societal transition and the second creative peak for Chinese women playwrights (H. Chen, 2018). Specifically, it focuses on Bai Fengxi, a representative figure who successfully recentered female experiences on stage (Denton, 2016). Using her *The Women Trilogy*—comprising *First Bathed in*

Moonlight, Once Loved and in a Storm Returning, and Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?—this study conducts a narrative analysis, examining the gender ideologies embedded in the dramas by considering both implied theatricality and unique drama narrative forms. Building upon the framework of feminist narratology, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How is female discursive authority characterized in early New Period women's drama?

RQ2: How do narrative practices construct this authority to shape female subjectivity?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Imperative of Narrative Dimension in Gender-Oriented Theater Studies

Gender-oriented theater studies have achieved substantial macro-level results by employing socio-political and cultural lenses, including uncovering women's trans-racial dilemmas (Abdurrahman et al., 2023), examining how theater drives social change through feminist opposition to neoliberal hegemony (Aston, 2016), and exploring the deconstruction of patriarchal myths by female playwrights (Hill, 2019). However, while enriching the understanding of drama's social functions, current research often neglects the playscript's micro-level narrative practices, which are foundational for negotiating gender authority within a drama. The dramatic text is the crucial means by which playwrights narrate potential future performances (Claycomb, 2013). Narrative analysis bridges the written text and stage practice, challenging the assumption that drama relies purely on physical action. Consequently, it is necessary to emphasize drama's narrative essence and the applicability of narratology (Jahn, 2001). However, research exploring this specific dimension remains inadequate.

Furthermore, dramatic texts differ from pure literature through their implied theatricality—an intrinsic structure formed by elements such as dialogue and stage directions (Puchner, 2002) that ensures a playscript serves as a semiotic blueprint for future performances (Elam, 1980/2005). Ignoring this theatricality risks missing the micro-mechanisms of power operations, because focusing solely on literary rhetoric or social content may result in treating the illusion of plot-level empowerment as a triumph for women as a group (Aston, 2020), whereas genuine empowerment requires that the collective, structural voice of women be heard (Cornwall, 2016). Therefore, narrative studies of dramatic texts need to transcend traditional literary perspectives and incorporate the consideration of implied theatricality.

2.2. The Binary Bias in Current Narrative-Focused Research on Women's Drama

The study of playscripts is and should be a fundamental area of women's drama studies, as the dramatic text represents the playwright's aesthetic and political intervention (Farfan & Ferris, 2013), reflecting how women translate private experiences into public socio-political discourse through dramatic narrative. However, current narrative-focused research is not only limited in quantity but also suffers from the binary bias between social narrative and literary narrative, failing to sufficiently address dramatic texts' implied theatricality.

Studies leaning toward social narrative often treat the script merely as a historical medium to examine, for example, the discursive reinforcement of patriarchy (Baykara,

2025), how women's textual narratives confront geopolitical conflicts (Kritzer, 2010), or female identity construction (Alabdullah, 2021). While validating the diverse social functions of women's drama, existing studies overemphasize narrative "content" at the expense of drama's unique narrative "form."

Conversely, the literary narrative approach conventionally scrutinizes playscripts through traditional literary lenses to analyze, for instance, rhetorical strategies in feminist advocacy (Kennedy & Serisier, 2024) and how plays articulate gender politics through the complicity of rhetoric and experiential content (Worthen, 1992). By over-relying on the rhetoric of textual expression, this approach inevitably neglects the non-textual implied theatricality of the playscript.

2.3. Feminist Narratology and Its Application to New Period Women's Drama

To transcend these limitations, this study adopts Susan Lanser's feminist narratology. The primary breakthrough of feminist narratology lies in dismantling the barrier between narrative form and ideological meaning, establishing the isomorphic relationship between narrative form and sociocultural structures (Lanser, 2014), and verifying that narrative form itself is an ideological expression (Lanser, 2015). Lanser (1992) argues that narrative form is a means by which women writers vie for authority through the intersection of social identity and rhetoric. This necessity of examining female writers' narrative forms is reinforced by Warhol (1992), who notes that classical structuralist poetics, largely derived from male-authored texts, obscures the artistic uniqueness of female writers.

Although the framework was originally formulated for literary texts, Warhol (2003) has successfully extended it to popular culture forms like film, comic autobiographies, and television. For drama, "narrative form" extends beyond linguistic rhetoric to encompass dialogic logic, stage directions, and character interactions. Thus, feminist narratology must be "theatricalized" to dissect playscripts. How this framework is theatricalized and subsequently applied will be detailed in the following theoretical framework section.

Furthermore, although Lanser's framework originated in a Western literary context, its focus on how women acquire discursive authority and construct subjectivity through narrative strongly resonates with China's 1980s. As the early stage of the Chinese New Period, which is also known as the post-Mao era, this phase marked the dissolution of grand collective narratives and the comprehensive awakening of individual subjectivity, particularly female consciousness (Barlow, 2004). A crucial historical task for Chinese female playwrights during this era was to reclaim their voice from the dual shackles of patriarchy and tradition. Essentially, their creative output was a narrative practice aimed at seizing discursive authority, making Lanser's theory a precise tool for analyzing authority negotiation in these dramas.

To thoroughly investigate whether New Period women's drama genuinely articulated women's voices and challenged patriarchal traditions, Bai Fengxi's trilogy composed in the 1980s serves as an optimal starting point. As one of the most prominent female playwrights in contemporary China, Bai reshaped the stage with her aesthetic signatures during a critical turning point (Yan, 2010). Through her trilogy, Bai negotiated with post-Mao mainstream culture, successfully integrating narratives based on female collective memory into the cultural mainstream (Chen, 2002). Current scholarship on *The Women Trilogy* has yielded insights into the awakening of female consciousness and reflections

of social transition. For instance, Chen (1997) highlights the trilogy's critique of feudal patriarchal oppression, while Tung (1987) views the plays as attempts to reconcile individualistic female rebellion with prevailing social harmony. However, a significant gap remains regarding the authority negotiation mechanisms at the micro-narrative level.

3. Methodology

Based on the research objectives, this study employs qualitative narrative analysis, a method that fosters a profound understanding of specific experiences through the careful scrutiny of narrative elements (Sevilla-Liu, 2023). This approach effectively excavates textual meanings and examines the interaction between narrative form and textual content. By focusing on narrative practices, it allows for an in-depth investigation of the dynamic relationship between female playwrights' narrative strategies and ideological expressions within the text, thereby exploring how women negotiate discursive authority to construct female subjectivity and articulate gender politics.

Furthermore, coding is utilized to process the data, as it facilitates the dismantling, categorization, and meaning-making of qualitative data (Blom & Nygren, 2010). Rather than applying static, mechanical classifications, this study identifies patterns and extracts themes through systematic and dynamic data treatment, continually linking them back to discursive authority. The integration of narrative analysis and coding ensures meticulous attention to detail via close reading at the micro-level while guaranteeing the examination of underlying ideological reflections.

3.1. Data and Sources

The primary data comprises three dramatic texts from Bai Fengxi's *The Women Trilogy*: *First Bathed in Moonlight* (*Mingyue chu zhao ren*), *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning* (*Fengyu gu ren lai*), and *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?* (*Buzhi qiu si zai shei jia*). This study adopts the 1991 English edition translated by Guan Yuehua and published by Chinese Literature Press to ensure accessibility for broader academic engagement. As optimal samples mapping 1980s Chinese women's diverse living conditions, these dramas densely depict generational and ideological frictions concerning issues like marriage, love, profession, and self-value. Analyzing these playscripts enables a transparent examination of how micro-narrative structures reconfigure gendered discursive authority.

Methodologically, this study excludes personal interviews or oral histories of the playwright, as well as stage productions or adaptations of the plays. This choice is grounded in the study's central objective: to investigate how specific narrative forms and strategies objectively endow female characters with discursive authority and participate in constructing female subjectivity, rather than tracing the playwright's subjective creative intent. Within the framework of feminist narratology, discursive authority is a structural capacity forged through the interaction between the narrator and narrative form; its ideological representations and power effects are generated during the text's theatrical operation. Over-relying on the playwright's retrospective accounts or original intentions risks falling into the intentional fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946) and may obscure the objective tension and deep mechanisms of gender politics and power negotiation embedded in the text itself. Therefore, this study treats the playscript's narrative practice as a self-sufficient arena of power operations.

Although focused on narrative mechanisms within the dramatic text, this study systematically incorporates secondary resources—such as the playwright’s creative notes, academic critiques of the plays, and social analyses of the era—to avoid decontextualized textual analysis. These materials are not used to verify subjective intent but are treated as paratexts and historical discourse coordinates. Examining these peripheral texts clearly outlines the social narratives and gender norms of China’s transitional society in the 1980s, enabling a more precise assessment of the extent to which *The Women Trilogy* conforms to, negotiates with, or subverts the dominant discourse of its time while granting women discursive authority.

3.2. Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis Procedure

Drawing on Susan Lanser’s feminist narratology, this study’s theoretical framework centers on narrative voice—a concept she proposed to examine discursive authority. Lanser (1992) categorizes narrative voice into three forms and conceptualizes women writers’ strategic selection among these forms as a struggle for discursive authority within patriarchal contexts. Expanding beyond Genette’s (1980) view of voice as a mere narrating instance, Lanser’s (2021) framework encompasses technical functions and ideological implications. While technically separating the narrated and real worlds, narrative voice ideologically bridges them by emphasizing social implications (Lanser, 1986), thereby endowing the narrative with the capacity to intervene in reality.

Narrative voice is critical for investigating discursive authority, which Lanser (1992) defines as highly contextualized and dependent on “specific receiving communities” (p. 6). A narrator’s authority relies on both the author’s textual strategies and the narrator’s alignment with dominant social power structures. Applying this framework to women’s drama thus reveals a bidirectional power logic: it highlights how female subjects contend for authority through narrative strategies while simultaneously exposing underlying gender power dynamics by interrogating authority negotiations among voices in the playscript.

Lanser (1992) categorizes narrative voice into three forms: authorial voice, personal voice, and communal voice. Because this theory originates from literary texts, applying it to drama requires necessary theoretical extensions to accommodate the medium’s unique theatricality and multi-narrator perspectives.

Authorial voice is characterized as heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential (Lanser, 1992). In this mode, the narrator remains outside the narrated world, and the authorial identity is granted structural and functional properties. In drama, authorial voice manifests as a non-character directive system, including stage directions, character lists, and prologues. By shifting the discourse of a character from a mere author’s cognitive object to the referential meaning of the authorial discourse, this voice provides a critical intersection between playwright and narrator (Bakhtin, 1984).

Personal voice emphasizes the narrator’s autodiegetic nature and subjective presence (Waldherr, 2023). Unlike literary works with single narrators where the boundary between personal and authorial voices blurs, drama’s multi-narrator structure necessitates a broader definition of personal voice, encompassing both unmediated experiencers and relayers, because when relayers express their genuine cognition, it also constitutes undeniable subject presence. When these narrators interact within a shared spatiotemporal dramatic scene, their linguistic and corporeal exchanges visually and

auditorily manifest authority negotiations. Consequently, theatrical “voice” transcends narrated words to include pauses and silences as integral elements of dramatic language.

Communal voice extends beyond personal and authorial modes, defined by Lanser (1992, p. 21) as “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority.” Unlike personal voice, whose authority relies on subject presence, communal voice derives authority from a community or its empowered representatives. Lanser categorizes communal voice into three forms: singular, a single narrator speaking for an external group; simultaneous, a narrator speaking on behalf of their own group; and sequential, multiple narrators from the same community sharing authority.

Building upon this theoretical framework, the study conducts a qualitative narrative analysis of *The Women Trilogy* through a hybrid deductive–inductive approach structured into three stages. Firstly, using Lanser’s narratological framework for deductive coding, as detailed in Table 1, this study constructs a structural matrix to categorize complex dramatic elements into specific narrative voices. Secondly, the analysis shifts to an inductive phase aimed at identifying patterns of discursive authority emerging from the coded data, recognizing two core forms: positional authority, derived from social structures and family ethical hierarchies, and epistemic authority, stemming from individual experience and subjective cognition. Finally, an integrative analysis investigates the interaction between narrative voices and discursive authorities, as well as the relationship between the two forms of authority themselves. This stage demonstrates how authority negotiation contributes to the construction of female subjectivity, revealing patterns such as silence as resistance and the politicization of private experience. Through this progressive analysis, the study elucidates the negotiation of authority and gender politics within narrative practices.

Table 1: Lanser-Informed A Priori Coding Scheme for Narrative Voice

Primary Category (Narrative Voice)	Sub-Category
A: Authorial Voice	N/A
B: Personal Voice	N/A
C: Communal Voice	C1: Singular Form C2: Simultaneous Form C3: Sequential Form

4. Findings and Discussion

Grounded in a rigorous qualitative narrative analysis of Bai Fengxi’s *The Women Trilogy* (hereafter referred to as *TWT*), this section systematically elucidates the structural characteristics of female discursive authority and its relationship with the construction of subjectivity. First, it examines the dual sources of female discursive authority, revealing the limitations of external positional authority, which is constrained by traditional patriarchal structures, alongside the generative mechanisms of internal epistemic authority, which stems from women’s individual life experiences. Second, it explores the dynamic interplay between these two forms of authority within the theatrical space, demonstrating how women engage in power resistance through silent presence and the politicization of private experience. Advancing this analysis, it reveals how Chinese women in the New Period exhibit an authentic, complex, and inherently contradictory subjectivity amidst the tension and integration of these two discursive authorities.

4.1. The Dual Sources of Discursive Authority

4.1.1 *The Foundations and Limitations of Positional Authority*

The data reveal instances of discursive authority derived from factors external to the narrator's subjectivity, such as professional identity, parental status within the family, and unmediated physical presence in dramatic scenes. The determining factor for acquiring this authority lies not in the subject's intrinsic qualities, but in their structural position within an organization or hierarchy, which Tirrell (2018) terms positional authority.

Fang Ruoming, the female protagonist in *First Bathed in Moonlight*, exemplifies a character whose positional authority is conferred by her professional identity. As the Director of the Provincial Women's Federation, her positional authority surpasses that of other female characters. The playscript explicitly foregrounds this authority. Specifically, the stage directions in Act One describe her home as "tastefully furnished," equipped with modern appliances like "a sofa, some armchairs, an electric fan and refrigerator," as well as "a telephone" (TWT, p. 104). In 1980s China, even in Shanghai—one of the country's most developed urban centers at the time—the refrigerator emerged as a novel symbol of social status (Lu, 2000), while the telephone was widely regarded as an absolute luxury typically confined to "government offices or businesses" (Naughton, 2007, p. 343). Through the authorial voice, the structural advantage of Fang Ruoming's positional authority is thus substantiated.

However, compared with other narrative voice forms, Fang Ruoming's positional authority is predominantly constructed through her personal voice. Her direct intervention at Chunman's home to resolve the latter's forced marriage explicitly enacts this authority. When Chunman sarcastically remarks that Fang must have come to punish her since she has not died yet, Fang remains unprovoked. Instead, she empathetically validates the rationale behind Chunman's perception: "She's justified in thinking this way. . . . In many cases it seems only when there is death involved do we take any notice. . . . Chunman, you have every reason to criticize us" (TWT, p. 132).

This speech reflects Fang's introspection and critique of the working methods of government officials, including herself. It demonstrates her sense of responsibility and her capacity to accept dissenting views, thereby constituting the subjectivity of an imperfect yet progressive female leader.

The formidable influence of Fang's positional authority is fully activated when she is directly present in a professional scene. Although Chunman's forced marriage crisis remains deadlocked for over half a month, Fang's on-site intervention catalyzes an immediate resolution: "(In a resolute tone.) Return the money right away and put an end to this bought-and-sold marriage" (TWT, p. 134). When Aunt Fan fears retaliation from the family of Chunman's nominal husband, Fang showcases her institutional problem-solving capacity by firmly declaring that "it is perfectly legitimate to oppose any marriage forced upon one" (TWT, p. 135). Armed with her prior investigations, she bypasses local panic and mobilizes bureaucratic power, directing the "local Women's Federation to see her through all the necessary procedures as soon as possible" (TWT, p. 135).

When the narrator is absent from a professional domain, the positional authority is often manifested through the communal voice, and the efficacy of this authority is attenuated

compared to instances of unmediated physical presence. Taking Fang Ruoming as an example again, when Aunt Chang calls an old friend in a leadership position to thwart her son's romance with Chunman, she reassures the friend who fears a complaint to the Women's Federation: "They may lodge a complaint with the Women's Federation?... Don't you worry. The director of the provincial branch is an old friend of mine." (*TWT*, p. 106). This serves as indirect evidence of Fang's capacity to mediate conflicts. However, upon discovering that Fang does not share her stance, Aunt Chang reacts: "CHANG (with annoyance and impatience): Say no more, please. Fang, you and I have been colleagues and friends for many years. How to handle the matter I leave to you. (Stalks out in a rage)." (*TWT*, p. 118). Because this dialogue occurs in Fang's home, with Aunt Chang appearing as a friend rather than a subordinate or a colleague, the spatial context is fundamentally domestic rather than professional. Consequently, while Aunt Chang acknowledges Fang's power, she exhibits no absolute submission to Fang's positional authority.

This limitation of positional authority due to the absence of the narrator from a professional scene is also evident in the other two dramatic texts. In *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning*, the female protagonist Xia Zhixian's status as a renowned doctor is repeatedly emphasized. When discussing their children's marriage, Mo Jin tells Xia that she is "a specialist well known at home and abroad," describing her son's marriage as "marrying above one's social status" (*TWT*, p. 29). In Act Three, Xia's positional authority is mediated through a telephone exchange with hospital colleagues, wherein she authoritatively instructs staff to ring "once every hour" and report "any symptom of change" (*TWT*, p. 54). While third-party accounts from other characters offer a mediated description of Xia's status, this vocal directive directly manifests her professional authority in action. However, unlike Fang Ruoming, who successfully resolves conflicts, Xia's authority as a famous doctor fails to exert any substantive impact on the narrative's core problems. Conversely, because the spatial context is predominantly confined to the domestic sphere, Xia's inability to balance career and family is recurrently highlighted, becoming the focal point of Mo Jin's attacks. When Xia's daughter Peng Yinge refuses to sacrifice her career for her husband, Mo Jin—Yinge's mother-in-law—derides Xia in the presence of the younger generation with the sarcastic adage, "Like mother, like daughter...." (*TWT*, p. 73), insinuating marital failure. Mo Jin even states that their "self-respecting and loving family" has "no room for a great lady" like Yinge (*TWT*, p. 73), derisively suggesting that career-oriented women strip their in-laws of dignity.

Similarly, in *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?*, Ye Yun is an outstanding researcher. Her colleague Qin Zheng affirms her competence through his personal voice, asserting, "I found these valuable references. They prove if you carry on the work along the lines you've been following, you're sure to succeed" (*TWT*, p. 261). He also notes that "in your pursuit of a career you've climbed up near the top of a pagoda" (*TWT*, p. 264). Yet, because the narrative revolves around domestic issues of marriage and romance, Ye Yun's positional authority grants her no leverage. Instead, her unmarried identity subjects her perspectives on marriage and romance to constant criticism. For instance, rather than attempting to empathize with her choices, her mother, Su Zhongyuan, predominantly blames her, asking, "Yunyun, you're too particular. . . . When will you stop being so choosy?" (*TWT*, p. 257). Even her subordinate Qin Zheng claims she has "too high standards" (*TWT*, p. 262). Evidently, the efficacy of a woman's positional authority is closely tied to her physical presence within a professional environment. Once removed from these specific spatial contexts, positional authority offers limited enhancement to her overall discursive authority.

The data also reveal another source of female positional authority, rooted in a woman's status as an elder within the family; however, this authority operates as an extension of the underlying patriarchal logic.

In *First Bathed in Moonlight*, Aunt Fan is the immediate agent behind Chunman's forced marriage. On the surface, she appears to possess absolute positional authority over Chunman's life. However, when Fang Ruoming takes action to dismantle this coerced marriage, Aunt Fan expresses gratitude, stating, "You have saved the life of my Mannie" (TWT, p. 136). Aunt Fan confides in Fang, explaining, "My husband died prematurely, leaving me a son and a daughter" (TWT, p. 137). To secure the funds necessary for her son's marriage, she was forced to "sell" Chunman, yet her words reveal genuine maternal anguish, underscoring the conflict between her authentic affection and her structural obligations: "What mother doesn't love her children? I got Mannie into this mess of a marriage because I had no alternative" (TWT, p. 137).

In Aunt Fan's account, the offspring are portrayed as a legacy left by her deceased husband. Facilitating her son's marriage to continue the patrilineal family line becomes her mandated duty. It is this structural obligation that forces Aunt Fan to make a decision contrary to her authentic will—coercing her daughter into marriage. The motivation behind Aunt Fan's actions perfectly exemplifies Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain, wherein women under severe systemic constraints are compelled to internalize and execute patriarchal mandates as a survival strategy, exercising oppressive authority over younger females to secure their own standing within the system, even when such actions cause personal grief. Furthermore, it is precisely the positional authority granted to a maternal identity by the patriarchal family that ensures the agonizing decision like Aunt Fan's is translated into reality.

This phenomenon—where a mother's authority is passively conferred by a patriarchal family structure—is also evident in *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?*. Although her three children have diverse relationship statuses, Su Zhongyuan, as a mother, is dissatisfied with the romantic lives of both her daughters and son. After repeated, failed attempts to intervene, she articulates her inner struggles through her personal voice: "Your father died when you were mere children, so I had to take all the responsibilities upon myself. Over the years I've been strict with myself and have been hoping that you children would . . . be a credit to me" (TWT, p. 253). Ultimately, the positional authority associated with the maternal identity is dictated by a patriarchal system of familial mandates. In essence, this authority transforms older women into surrogate agents who perpetuate patriarchal control.

4.1.2 The Generation of Epistemic Authority: The Empowerment of Narrative Voice

In addition to positional authority, the data reveal another form of female authority, one originating intrinsically from the subjects themselves. Specifically, an individual's lived experiences and specialized knowledge cultivate both cognitive self-assurance and external credibility, thereby securing their authority within a specific domain—a concept Zagzebski (2012) terms epistemic authority.

The data indicate that female epistemic authority primarily stems from personal experiences, and at the narrative level, it is closely constructed through the personal voice. Among various lived experiences, traumatic or painful ones are particularly

significant. By supplementing specific events with a female subject's perspective, these painful experiences establish female epistemic authority.

In *First Bathed in Moonlight*, Fang Lin rashly concludes that her mother, Fang Ruoming, is a weak woman who missed out on true love due to an overreliance on external validation. This superficial judgment, formed via discovered correspondence from her mother's former lover and Granny's account of Ruoming's romantic history, is dismantled by Ruoming's personal voice. Recalling her youth during the post-Liberation "upsurge of revolutionary fervor," Ruoming reveals that separating from her politically suspect sweetheart is a structural sacrifice dictated by ideological compliance rather than personal frailty: "I really thought the time had come to prove my loyalty to the revolution and to sacrifice my love for its sake" (TWT, p. 161). It is because Granny witnesses this historical complexity that she criticizes Fang Lin's arbitrary condemnation of Ruoming.

Likewise, *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning* demonstrates how Xia Zhixian's professional success ironically solidifies social accusations of her being a cold-blooded workaholic. Even her daughter, Peng Yingge, initially blames her for prioritizing career over family. However, Xia's personal voice refutes these accusations, uncovering that her marital breakdown, at its core, stems from a patriarchal trap. Her testimony underscores how her career is suppressed by a husband who demands her "only as a wife, not as some famous doctor," and a mother-in-law who weaponizes traditional morality by questioning whether she is "still a woman" (TWT, pp. 62–63). This revelation validates the acute dilemma of New Period professional women caught between traditional expectations and modern self-actualization (Honig & Hershat, 1988), ultimately shifting Yingge from resentment to genuine understanding.

In *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?*, a similar narrative trajectory is evident with Ye Yun. Su Zhongyuan persistently believes her daughter, Ye Yun, remains unmarried due to her exacting standards for a marriage partner, falsely equating Ye Yun's high professional competence with an uncomplicated work environment. This misconception is shattered when Ye Yun reveals that she is scrutinized like a commodity during blind dates, and that despite her strict professional boundaries, a colleague's jealous wife sabotaged her work team out of fear that the unmarried Ye Yun might pose a threat to her marriage. These disclosures leave her family shocked and saddened.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that women's presence as subjects within their personal experiences endows their narration with immense credibility. Epistemic authority enables female subjects not only to be present but also to articulate their voices, thereby ensuring the possibility of being heard.

In terms of narrative form, the data indicate that female experiences in the dramatic texts are repeatedly articulated through extended monologues or lengthy dialogues.

Beyond the personal voice, the communal voice also contributes to the construction of female epistemic authority. For instance, in *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning*, by listing the numerous newborns given names that honor Xia Zhixian, Cheng Kang attests to the vast number of patients who are deeply grateful for Xia's medical treatment. He specifically notes that "too many babies have been similarly named. (Pointing to the row of baby photos.) See, Jingxian, Respect Xian; Yangxian, Revere Xian; Aixian, Love Xian . . ." (TWT, p. 24).

By relaying the voices of the patients who benefited from Xia's expertise, Cheng expresses their immense respect, confirming Xia's status as a highly influential physician. However, much like the limitations of positional authority, the narrative refrains from explicitly staging direct scenes where this epistemic authority demonstrates operational power.

4.2. Narrative Practices, Authority Negotiation, and Subjectivity Construction

4.2.1 *The Micro-Level of Narrative: Silent Resistance and the Politicization of Experience*

The negotiation of authority among narrators via narrative strategies reflects a micro-level discursive power struggle within the narrative form. This study finds that through the construction and negotiation of positional and epistemic authority, women's drama of the New Period reconfigured the passive silence of marginalized women into active resistance. Alongside this, these narratives elevated private experiences from individual narratives to collective expressions of shared trauma, thereby facilitating the politicized articulation of gendered experiences.

The Women Trilogy centers on the female predicament and, furthermore, explicitly reveals women's vulnerability regarding discursive authority. As previously analyzed, through the narrative detachment of the female subject from specific dramatic scenes, the operational impact of both positional and epistemic authority is objectively attenuated. Notably, within this narrative framework, silence is not merely a consequence of marginalization; rather, it is strategically designed as a tactic of resistance.

In *First Bathed in Moonlight*, although Chunman desperately attempts to resist a loveless marriage, she concedes that she lacks the foundation or right to defy the arranged union. Consequently, in the scenes depicting her forced marriage, Chunman is consistently rendered silent. For instance, when Aunt Fan helplessly prepares to send Chunman back to her in-laws, persuading the girl to stop running away, Chunman "stubbornly turns her back to Aunt Fan" and "takes up the bundle of clothing and flings it onto the floor, the colorful clothes scattering all over" (*TWT*, pp. 128-129). In another instance, when Chunman mistakes Fang Ruoming for an official arriving to penalize her for escaping, she responds to Fang's sympathetic questioning about her suffering with repeated silence, merely hanging "her head without speaking" (*TWT*, p. 131).

As a rural girl, Chunman lacks sufficient authority to articulate a personal voice; however, her silence when confronting authority figures manifests her resistance in the form of an authorial voice. Here, the implied theatricality imbues silence with profound political significance. Female voicelessness ceases to be a textual void; instead, through stage directions such as turning her back or throwing clothes, it translates into bodily resistance characterized by visual tension and spatial oppression. Echoing this approach in *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?*, when Su Zhongyuan presses Ye Fei about her divorce and Ye Yun about her failed blind dates, the repeated omission of direct answers by Fei and Yun functions as a variant of silence, expressing a gentle resistance against their mother's excessive interference in their romantic and marital affairs. Through the narrative use of silence, the text repositions women from passively silenced figures into resisters.

If individual rebellion remains a private matter, the concentrated expression of similar experiences across multiple subjects collectively achieves a narrative representation of the macro-level gender predicament. A prime example is *Say, Who Like Me Is Prey to Fond Regret?*, where Ye Fei, a divorced woman preparing to establish her career, and Ye Yun, an unmarried intellectual, confront parallel dilemmas despite their distinct professions. Ye Fei recalls facing hostile questioning during her marriage from her husband's family, who were suspicious of her normal professional interactions, demanding to know, "Are your friends men or women?" (*TWT*, p. 221). She laments that despite doing "nothing improper" and "absolutely nothing questionable," she was "unfairly treated," as her mother-in-law and other relatives were "forever finding fault with" her (*TWT*, p. 243). Ye Yun encounters analogous prejudice. Although she initially receives help on her work project from a senior male colleague, "idle gossips" quickly force her to sever contact. Compounding her distress, this senior colleague's wife—who is also Ye Yun's former classmate and friend—believes the rumors and urges her to "stop working so hard" and instead "be sensible and find a boyfriend and get married quick" (*TWT*, pp. 219-220). Ye Yun describes the intense scrutiny that makes people "talk and gossip" whenever she comes near a man, forcing her to "think over and over again before taking a single step" (*TWT*, p. 218).

The personal voices through which Ye Fei and Ye Yun express their respective hidden agonies converge to reveal that women, as a whole, share analogous arduous experiences despite their differences. In other words, individual experiences grant the female subject the epistemic authority to speak, and these aligned personal narratives collectively construct a macro-level portrayal of the female predicament. This is how the dramatic text successfully achieves the politicization of gendered experiences.

4.2.2 *Negotiating Positional and Epistemic Authorities in Female Subjectivity Construction*

The analysis indicates that in New Period women's drama, positional authority and epistemic authority do not function in isolation; rather, they interact in tandem to facilitate the construction and articulation of female subjectivity.

In a patriarchal society, women are systematically marginalized across economic, political, and social domains (Walby, 1990), which inherently restricts their access to diverse forms of positional authority compared to men. This limitation is evident in *The Women Trilogy*. For instance, as previously analyzed, although Xia Zhixian and Ye Yun are knowledgeable and highly accomplished career women, their positional authority is portrayed as weakened and is only perceptible indirectly through communal or authorial voices. In the domestic scenes predominantly portrayed in these plays, these women are restricted to the roles of mothers and daughters confined by patriarchal norms. Essentially, by detaching female subjects from professional settings, the playwright arranges the text's internal theatrical elements to metaphorically underscore the fragility of women's positional authority.

Conversely, male characters occupy a markedly superior structural position. Since paternal authority inherently overrides maternal authority within a patriarchal framework, men maintain dominance even in the domestic sphere. For example, in *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning*, Peng Lun is a chronically absent father who lives in a different city, misses his daughter Yinge's wedding, and is even unsure whether his ex-wife and daughter still reside in their former house. Yet, when Yinge and her husband clash over studying abroad, Yinge's mother-in-law, Mo Jin, seeks Peng Lun's intervention.

Indeed, Peng Lun's arrival resembles a king returning to a long-neglected territory: Yingge awaits him, stating, "In a little while there's going to be an important . . . an important visitor coming. I must go and meet him" (*TWT*, p. 85). Upon his first appearance, the authorial voice describes him: "He glances about like a stranger to the place and yet like someone familiar with it" (*TWT*, pp. 86-87). Facing the home he abandoned years ago, he displays only a slight estrangement rather than awkwardness or guilt. Even Cheng Kang, meeting him for the first time, greets him deferentially: "I've already heard a great deal about you, sir" (*TWT*, p. 97). Thus, Peng Lun swiftly re-establishes his core domestic status merely through his presence, irrespective of his prolonged absence.

This structural marginalization presents a challenge for female characterization: how can women lacking positional authority project a credible and influential voice? Epistemic authority serves as a crucial compensatory mechanism. It legitimizes women's lived experiences, cognitions, and subjective feelings, providing the foundation for the generation of narrative voices that offer distinct female perspectives. For instance, while Aunt Fan appears ruthless in selling her daughter to fund her son's marriage, she is internally plagued by agony; though Ye Fei exhibits toughness by divorcing her husband, she admits to missing him "all the time" (*TWT*, p. 268); and while Fang Ruoming seemingly abandons her young lover for revolutionary ideals resolutely, her personal voice reveals her regret: "I have not stopped one moment rueing it. I'm extremely sorry to have wronged him" (*TWT*, p. 171). These narrative voices provide the female participants' emotional and cognitive interpretations of specific events, thereby contributing to the construction of a nuanced female subjectivity.

Furthermore, the complementary interplay between positional and epistemic authority contributes to the construction of a multidimensional female subjectivity. As previously analysed, positional authority derives from external structural factors, meaning that possessing such authority inevitably signifies the subject's alignment with mainstream social norms. However, a subject's authentic feelings and desires do not always align with these normative expectations. In such instances, epistemic authority becomes an effective means of articulating an authentic inner voice, thereby working alongside positional authority to form a complex, multi-layered subjectivity.

For example, when the retired cadre Aunt Chang attempts to exploit Fang Ruoming's official status, seeking to mobilize Fang's positional authority to thwart her son's romance with the rural girl Chunman, Fang implicitly rejects this interference, acting in accordance with the professional obligations inherent to her positional authority as a government official. She criticizes the spread of "feudalistic ideas of caste" (*TWT*, p. 109) and gravely warns Aunt Chang about the tragic consequences of parental meddling: "Marriages by the parents' arrangement . . . are multiplying. . . . Because they can't marry of their own free will, many young women have been driven to despair. . . . Now, as a government cadre, you . . ." (*TWT*, p. 118). Yet, when Fang later discovers that her own daughter, Fang Lin, is in love with a rural youth, Fan Xi, she invokes the epistemic authority of a mother to interrogate Lin: "What is the basis of your love? The differences between you two are simply too great" (*TWT*, p. 155); "What I mean is that there must be some kind of basis for love, or else what happiness can you expect from an ill-matched union?" (*TWT*, p. 155). In a moment of desperation, Fang even snaps, "Just tell him he'd better ask his mother to buy him a wife with that 800 yuan" (*TWT*, p. 156).

Clearly, Fang Ruoming disapproves of the traditional convention that grants parents the authority to dictate their children's romantic and marital choices. However, upon shifting

from a detached mediator to an implicated participant, her actual behavior and mindset fail to fully extricate themselves from the residual inertia of traditional patriarchal values. This schism precisely mirrors playwright Bai Fengxi's own perception of the female predicament in 1980s China, as documented in her creative notes for *The Women Trilogy*. In an era defined by the fierce collision between obsolete customs and progressive ideals, while women achieved a certain degree of liberation, they simultaneously confronted unprecedented dilemmas; consequently, perplexity emerged as a defining, shared existential condition among women of that transitional period.

This schism is also classically exemplified by Mo Jin in *Once Loved and in a Storm Returning*. Conforming to traditional norms that idealize the "good wife" and devalue female professional success, Mo Jin abandons her career to become a full-time housewife. Outwardly satisfied with her socially sanctioned role, she lectures Peng Yinge to prioritize family, while also directly admonishing Yinge's mother—her former classmate, Xia Zhixian: "You've made a name for yourself, but you . . . you don't get any enjoyment out of life—a celebrity in isolation of her own making. You are an 'oddball,' I must say" (*TWT*, p. 26). Yet, when Mo Jin strips away the facade of the good wife, she vents her true feelings to her husband, weeping that she would "rather not be the wife of an official" if she could possess Xia's professional achievements (*TWT*, p. 100).

Mo Jin's case demonstrates that the divergence between the narrative voices of positional and epistemic authority can transcend perplexity and illustrate the profound fracturing of the female subject. This rupture underscores that occupying socially sanctioned roles fails to yield authentic fulfillment for women; instead, compliance with patriarchal norms may result in internal psychological fragmentation.

As the preceding analysis reveals, the negotiation of dual discursive authority in the narrative is not a simple substitution of positional authority by epistemic authority, but a dynamic process involving constraint, compensation, and co-constitution. Within this process, positional authority is structurally constrained by socio-familial hierarchies embedded in patriarchal gender relations, while epistemic authority operates as a critical narrative strategy that transforms dramatic silence and personal voices into vehicles of resistance and collective accusation, thereby politicizing private experience. Through this interaction, the two forms of authority constitute the discursive structure through which a layered and multidimensional female subjectivity integrating social positioning and subjective emotional experience is constructed in New Period Chinese women's drama.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how discursive authority is negotiated and female subjectivity is constructed within dramatic texts, utilizing Bai Fengxi's *The Women Trilogy* as a case study. Scholarship in this field has long wrestled with a binary tendency: either prioritizing macro-level socio-historical content, neglecting micro-level narrative forms, or applying rigid literary frameworks that overlook the playscript's inherent theatricality. To bridge these gaps, this research employs Susan Lanser's feminist narratology, advancing a theatrical translation of her framework to dissect how dramatic texts actualize macro-level gender expressions through narrative micro-mechanisms.

This study demonstrates that discursive authority within *The Women Trilogy* manifests as a dual structure comprising positional authority, determined by external socio-professional identities and familial ethical hierarchies, and epistemic authority, derived from individual experiences and subjective cognition. Positional authority is inherently pre-set. Since the narrator's subjective agency can rarely influence it, subjects must self-discipline according to mainstream social norms to maintain this authority, which leads to the limitations of women's positional authority within patriarchal structures. Conversely, epistemic authority is rooted in authentic emotions and the individual's unique experiences, effectively legitimizing the voices of structurally marginalized women. It is through negotiating these two authorities into a complementary and balanced relationship that the dramatic narrative constructs a nuanced and authentic female subjectivity.

In the narrative of this New Period female playwright, women are depicted neither as blind followers of patriarchal rules nor as fearless heroines shattering their chains. Rather, they are ordinary individuals struggling with bewilderment between traditional social norms and their awakening self-awareness. Within the dramatic texts, they outwardly conform to social expectations in their behavior while simultaneously utilizing silence as a theatrical action to express resistance, drawing upon narrative voice to transform personal dilemmas into politicized expressions. The fragmentation and unification of socio-cultural and subjective factors within female subjectivity emerge from this fractured discursive state, which stems from the tug-of-war between the two authorities. This complex subjectivity serves as a highly concentrated reflection of the dilemmas, bewilderment, and struggles faced by Chinese women during the fierce ideological collisions of the 1980s. Thus, the value of dramatic narrative lies not merely in constructing a narrated world or serving as a passive mirror to specific socio-historical contexts; rather, it functions as an active practice that probes the deep structural factors behind gender phenomena and attempts to reshape gender discourse.

In terms of interdisciplinary innovation, this study extends feminist narratology from traditional literary genres to drama, adapting its concepts to theatrical elements such as stage directions and silence. In doing so, the study expands the theory's application scope to theater studies. By drawing upon the theory's capacity to simultaneously encompass narrative forms and ideological dimensions, this research also offers a qualitative analytical approach for dramatic texts, which provides a novel perspective for the gender and political criticism of drama, moving beyond prevalent macro-level socio-cultural and purely literary approaches.

However, several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. First, to ensure a representative case analysis, this research focuses on classical plays from a specific historical period. The generalizability of this dual-authority framework—composed of positional and epistemic authorities—requires further validation across different historical and cultural contexts. Second, because this study emphasizes a theatrical reading of the dramatic text and strictly focuses on the playwright's narrative, it deliberately excludes stage productions from its scope. Future research could extend this intersectional approach of narrative and theatricality to more diverse dramatic texts and performance forms, further exploring the profound relationship between narrative forms and ideological dimensions.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study is based on the textual analysis of publicly available dramatic literature and does not involve human participants or animal subjects.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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