

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A.1 Background of Research

Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), based on Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, is a haunting drama set in 1970s suburban Michigan. The film explores adolescence, repression, and the fragility of femininity through the tragic story of the Lisbon sisters. Narrated by neighbourhood boys who idealize the girls, the film contrasts their fantasy with the harsh reality of the sisters' lives, marked by oppressive parental control and stifled identities. Using visual storytelling and a dreamlike aesthetic, Coppola critiques societal forces that shape the lives of young women, highlighting the disconnect between external perceptions and internal struggles.

Monden (2013) argues that *The Virgin Suicides* visualizes the complex negotiation between autonomy and restriction in girlhood, presenting femininity as a fragile and paradoxical space where young women are simultaneously idealized and suppressed. This depiction aligns with broader cultural narratives in which adolescent femininity is often perceived through a binary of either pathological fragility or overt sexual assertiveness (McRobbie, 2009). Coppola's ethereal aesthetics, particularly through the Lisbon sisters' visual representation, further emphasize how societal constraints dictate young women's identities and limit their agency (Monden, 2013). The story begins with Cecilia Lisbon's first suicide attempt, a tragic event that sets off a series of increasingly tragic suicides among her sisters. Coppola's directorial choices garnered significant recognition, earning her the MTV Movie Award for Best New Filmmaker (2001) and the Young Hollywood Award for Best Director (2001).

Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) is widely regarded for its portrayal of adolescent isolation and femininity within the confines of suburban

life. With a solid rating of 87% on Google, 7.2/10 on IMDb, and 3.8/5 on Letterboxd, the film's widespread popularity highlights its impact on audiences. Despite differing opinions, the film's aesthetic and thematic depth continue to captivate viewers, sparking critical conversations about its portrayal of gender, memory, and societal constraints. Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) masterfully captures the eerie nostalgia and melancholy of adolescent longing and repression. A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* praises the film's atmospheric fidelity to Jeffrey Eugenides's novel, particularly through its hazy cinematography and dreamlike sequences. While the film succeeds in evoking mood and memory, Scott critiques its "arty detachment" from the Lisbon sisters' tragedy, suggesting that it embalms rather than mourns them. Nonetheless, Kirsten Dunst's performance as Lux stands out, lending the film a magnetic emotional core (Scott, 2000). Many viewers on Letterboxd praise its unsettling and fierce emotional depth, with reviews describing it as "haunting" and "introspective," while others critique the male-dominated narrative perspective, including a request for "a story from the girls' perspective" (Letterboxd. n.d.).

Critics highlight how the film critiques the objectification of the Lisbon sisters by the male gaze, with some emphasizing the disconnect between voyeuristic fascination and the girls' real emotional struggles (Lawrence, 2018; Stanford, 2024). In addition to these critiques, others similarly critique the male perspective and the film's portrayal of the "dead girl" trope, a recurring issue in American cinema (Hajimirsadeghi, 2024). In contrast, some reviewers focus on the film's deeper themes of emotional turmoil and the complexities of adolescence, resonating with viewers experiencing similar feelings of isolation (Mackintosh, 2023; Cline, 2018). The film tells the story about suffering on women and how their environment forces them into a system that suppresses women's mental health. Patriarchy, is a system that shapes gender norms and restricts women's autonomy, in central to understanding the oppression of the Lisbon sisters. The film begins with Lisbon Sisters as objects of male gaze and

observation rather than as individuals. This perspective reinforces how patriarchal structures reduce women to passive figures, stripping them of autonomy and voice (Hutner, 2024). The parents make strict parental control over the sisters, such as setting limits on social interactions, suppressing their desires, and regulating their bodies. They conformed to the social environment that shaped female behavior (Wandland, 2011; Rogers, 2012). As Hutner (2024) argues, *The Virgin Suicides* explains how patriarchal oppression is wrapped in a soft pink aesthetic, a girlish aura, romanticizing their suffering rather than manage to understand their suffering.

This critical perspective is connected to gender theory in this thesis, which explains how patriarchal culture and the environment shaped the Lisbon sisters' suicides. The film represents female suffering and societal pressures that shape women's mental health issues, making this position *The Virgin Suicides* as work of art and feminist criticism. This thesis aims to explore how these elements contributed to the sisters' tragic ending and what they will reveal about gender norms and their impact on mental health.

Previous studies has examined themes such as repression, adolescence, and patriarchal domination in *The Virgin Suicides*. For instance, Navarro (2024) addresses the "Sad Girl Aesthetic" and emphasizes how society unaware of women's emotional experiences. Wandland (2011) discusses patriarchal repression and its effects on women's autonomy, while Rogers (2012) looks at the relationship between societal pressures and emotional instability in teenage girls. However, these analyses mostly offer general thematic insights without linking to gender performativity and the suicides of the Lisbon sisters.

While a considerable amount of work has been done, a significant gap remains a notable deficiency in applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to explore how social norms constructed and repressed the identities of the Lisbon Sisters. While previous studies recognize themes of repression and gender roles; however, they often miss how these factors play a

direct role in the sisters' suicides as a form of critique and resistance against patriarchal oppression. (Butler, 1993).

This research aims to fill the gap in previous studies by applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine the influence of patriarchy and societal expectations on the sisters' tragic fates. By examining the role of patriarchy and repression in their suicides, this study positions *The Virgin Suicides* as a feminist critique and commentary on systemic issues affecting young women's mental health and their identities.

Through this framework, this study explores how film depictions of women's suffering critique the subconscious social forces and norms that limit women's experiences. The suicide of the Lisbon sisters is analyzed as a reflection of oppressive patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy and a subversive resistance to the impossibility of living within such a rigid framework. This study offers an understanding of how the sisters' lives and deaths embody a confrontation with patriarchal supremacy and the psychological impacts of gender-based oppression.

A.2 Problems of Research

Based on the background above, the research problem formulation is as follows:

The questions for this study are as follows:

1. How does the suicidality reflect women's oppression?
2. How does the suicidality challenge the patriarchal supremacy?

A.3 Objectives of Research

1. To analyze how the suicidality of the Lisbon sisters in Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* reflects the oppression faced by women through societal, cultural, and familial expectations.

2. To examine how the suicidality challenges patriarchal supremacy by exposing the restrictive gender roles and power dynamics within the narrative.

A.4 Significance of the Research

Theoretically, this study aims to enrich the existing literature on gender studies by providing a nuanced analysis of *The Virgin Suicides* as a critical text that engages deeply with themes of female repression, societal expectations, and mental health. By situating the film within the context of gender theory, the research will expand upon discussions regarding the representation of women in visual culture, exploring how media can perpetuate or challenge patriarchal norms.

This research is needed to do in order to enhance the people's understanding of the interpretation of female suicide in media and its implications on the society. By understanding the culture and the society surrounding the Lisbon sisters' suicides, the study give broader discussions on mental health awareness, particularly in relation to young women. This research are beneficial for educators, mental health professionals, and advocates who deal with the issues of gender inequality and the stigma surrounding mental health. By analyzing how the film depicts the tragic consequences of unaddressed emotional turmoil and the silencing of women's voices, this study also may contribute to the development of resources which are aimed to promote healthier portrayals of women in media. Furthermore, the research can help to strengthen a clear understanding of the complexities surrounding female identity, mental health, and the cultural descriptions that shape these issues.

A.5 Limitation of the Problem

Based on problems and objectives of this research, this study is limited to the film adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides* directed by Sofia Coppola. While the

novel written by Jeffrey Eugenides provides the original narrative, this research does not analyze the novel in depth. The analysis focuses primarily on the representation of the Lisbon sisters and their suicides as depicted in the film, using gender theory as a framework. Other characters, such as the narrators or male observers, are only examined to the extent that they contribute to understanding the oppression and suicidality of the Lisbon sisters.

A.6 Definition of Key Terms

In order to clarify the key terms used in this study, some definitions are put forward:

Suicidality

Suicidality encompasses thoughts, behaviors, and actions related to suicide, including ideation, planning, attempts, and completion. This phenomenon often arises due to complex psychological, social, and cultural factors (World Health Organization, 2019).

Gender Oppression

Gender oppression refers to systemic inequalities in which individuals, particularly women, are subjected to limitations and discrimination due to societal structures and patriarchy (Lorber, 1994).

A.7 Organization of the Research Report

This research consists of three chapters. The first chapter is the Introduction, which explains the background of the research, the research problem, the objectives of the research, limitation of the research, the significance of the research, and the organization of the research report. The second chapter is the Theoretical Framework, which presents the key theories and concepts that form the foundation for the study, including gender theory and its application to *The Virgin Suicides*. The third chapter is Research Methodology, which describes the type of research, data sources, methods of data collection, and

techniques for data analysis used in this study. The fourth chapter is Results and Discussion, which analyzes the reasons behind the suicides of the Lisbon sisters and how their actions reflect the oppression of women, as portrayed in the film *The Virgin Suicides*. This chapter applies the theoretical framework to interpret the data and provides critical insights. The fifth chapter is Conclusion, which summarizes the main findings of the research, reflects on the implications, and offers suggestions for future studies.