

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **B.1 Theoretical Framework**

This research applies gender theory to analyze the suicidality of the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 1999). Rather than defining gender theory, this section explores how society expectations and cultural narratives shape female adolescence, agency, and oppression. By exploring perspectives from feminist theorists, this study examines how patriarchal structures set female identity and impact to the sisters' tragic fate and how *The Virgin Suicides* critiques patriarchal oppression and explores the impact of gendered restrictions on female identity.

##### **B.1.1 Judith Butler's Gender Performativity**

Based on the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler, gender performativity for understanding how gender identities and roles are not nature, but created through repeated actions from society (Butler, 1990). In Butler's works such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler challenges the traditional binary of sex and gender, arguing that both are culturally created through performative acts. Gender, for Butler, is not something one is, but something one does, that is a cycle of repetitive acts that make the illusion of a stable identity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990; *Bodies That Matter*, 1993).

Gender is not an natural characteristic connected to biological sex, but rather a set of repeated behaviours and norms created by society structures. These behaviours, gestures, and acts are planned by norms, which order how individuals should perform and behave from their gender. According to Butler,

gender performativity refers to the repetitive action of these norms, which creates the illusion of a natural and stable gender identity.

In Butler's theory, the individuals are not a pre-existing subjects who perform gender but the subjects who are produced through these performative acts. Gender is not an expression of an internal identity, but a process which identity is created.

The gender norms are produced through society institutions such as law, medicine, and media, which order what is considered an acceptable gender performance. These norms support binary gender categories (masculine/feminine) and produce power relations that set individual behaviour.

Therefore, gender performativity is controlled by these society norms, and deviation from these norms can result in marginalization or social punishment.

Sandra Bem (1993), through her Gender Schema Theory, complements Butler's notion of performativity by explaining how individuals internalize cultural definitions of gender from an early age. Bem argues that society provides "schemas" or cognitive frameworks that guide how individuals perceive themselves and others based on gender. These schemas become embedded in one's self-concept, making conformity to gender norms feel natural—even when those norms are restrictive.

Elizabeth Wilson (1985) similarly emphasizes the visual and material dimension of gender through clothing. She explains that dress functions as a "social script," visually performing and reinforcing gender roles. These outward markers, such as modesty or delicacy in women's fashion, help solidify internalized gender expectations. Both Bem and Wilson support Butler's claim that gender identity is constructed and regulated through social practices that often go unquestioned.

This framework is important in understanding how patriarchal structures continue, not only through male authority but also through women's

participation in maintaining these systems. In patriarchal societies, women are often conditioned to internalize gender norms from a young age, making them active agents—though often unconsciously—in reproducing oppressive ideologies. As a result, women may enforce traditional gender roles upon other women, particularly their daughters, through daily interactions and expectations. These actions include encouraging conformity, discouraging independence, and promoting ideals of femininity that align with societal expectations. Such practices are deeply rooted in social conditioning and the desire to maintain social acceptance. Therefore, patriarchal values persist not only because of overt male dominance but also because of how women, shaped by these very norms, participate in their reproduction and enforcement.

An example of this phenomenon is patriarchal motherhood, where women unconsciously continue patriarchal values by socializing their daughters into traditional gender roles. This process is often shaped by internalized misogyny, social conditioning, and a desire for acceptance. As Polatnick (1983) argues, men hold superior power in political, economic, and social domains, while women's subordination is reinforced through ideological constructs that limit their autonomy. One of the most dangerous manifestations is in the domestic domains, where women, especially mothers, are positioned as enforcers of patriarchal gender norms (Kelly-Gadol, 1976). Mothers, for instance, may emphasize marriage and domesticity as a woman's primary purpose, discourage ambition, or teach their daughters to prioritize pleasing others over their own aspirations (Edet, 2025).

Within the framework of gender performativity, this reinforces the idea that women are not naturally predisposed to certain behaviors but are instead conditioned to act in ways that uphold existing power structures. Hollingworth (1916) highlights that the concept of "maternal instinct" is not a biological certainty but a socially constructed expectation that serves to confine women to domestic roles. As Fineman (2014) notes, motherhood itself has been historically

used as a tool for controlling women by limiting their economic independence and personal agency. When women pass these expectations onto their daughters—encouraging passivity, prioritizing marriage over personal ambition, or discouraging assertiveness—they are unconsciously sustaining the very structures that oppress them (Webster, 2021). Bethany Webster (2021) argues that patriarchy often passes through the mother, as women who have been shaped by these systems unknowingly impose the same restrictions on their daughters. This includes discouraging assertiveness, prioritizing beauty and obedience, and silencing emotions such as anger or defiance (Webster, 2021). Such behaviors reinforce Butler's argument that gender is not something one is born with but is performed and sustained through societal expectations.

Butler's argument that gender is a performative act is clear in how women, despite being marginalized by patriarchy, often reinforce the very system that oppresses them. By normalizing and spreading rigid gender roles through repeated performative acts, patriarchal motherhood becomes a mechanism through which the ideology of male dominance is nonstop across generation (Butler, 1990; Kelly-Gadol, 1976; Webster, 2021; Hollingworth, 1916).

Butler also highlights the subversive potential of gender performativity. Because gender is shaped through repetition, there is always the possibility of disrupting these norms by performing gender in non-normative ways. This opens up space for challenging traditional gender roles and creating new forms of identity. Butler's theory allows to view suicide not simply as a personal tragedy, but as a performative act that can challenge normative structures. Suicide can be understood as a performative act that challenges these normative discourses and opens up space to question the societal pressures that contribute to gendered violence (Butler, 1990).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a framework for analyzing gender dynamics in *The Virgin Suicides*. It shows how the Lisbon sisters are controlled by expectations of femininity, and their suicides can be seen as a

form of resistance to these oppressive norms. Butler's theory helps explain how the pressure to conform to gender roles, imposed by their family and society, leads to feelings of suffocation and despair. The sisters' limited domestic space and rigid standards of femininity imposed by their mother further illustrate this gendered oppression.

When viewing suicide through Butler's theoretical lens, the act of suicide can be seen as performative, not just in the sense of a single act but as part of a series of series of gestures and rituals. These rituals contemplating suicide, acquiring the means, planning the method, and carrying out the act, all create and reinforce meanings around death, particularly around gendered notions of suicide. For example, how society views and values suicide based on gender roles (e.g., violent or passive methods) can shape how suicide is performed and interpreted. Butler's concept of performativity reveals that suicide is not an isolated act of individual will but is shaped by historical, social, and gendered discourses. The performative nature of suicide means that it is not simply an internal or private act but one that is continuously reinforced by societal and cultural meanings.

Furthermore, the public vision surrounding their suicides reinforces how gender oppression persists even in death. The societal obsession with their purity and martyrdom reflects ongoing efforts to control and define female bodies and identities. The performative nature of their suicides disrupts these norms, exposing the fragility of the patriarchal structures that seek to define them. Using Butler's perspective, this study views the Lisbon sisters' suicides not simply as personal tragedies but as acts of resistance that challenge the societal pressures and gender expectations that govern their lives. This interpretation highlights the interplay between gendered performances, systemic oppression, and the performative suicide as a critique of patriarchal norms.

### **B.1.2 Gender Oppression and Cinematic Technique**

In the film, gender oppression is often highlighted by cinematographic choices, narrative framing, and performative reiterations of gender norms. As Sachar (2024) says that films enable gender inequality by confining female characters to limiting roles. This is such as the *damsel in distress* or the passive dependent figure. These descriptions show patriarchal ideologies that reinforce traditional gender norms which place women as objects of male control, in spite of the individuals themselves.

Critic on how patriarchal system define women as “other” cause the reduction of their roles also focus on reproduction and sexuality also said by Luce Irigaray’s in her work *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977). This argument is supported by Sultana (2012) who highlights how patriarchal structures institutionalize power imbalances through societal institutions like family, education, and religion which is framing women as subordinates. These theories give knowledge how filmic representations emphasize gender oppression on both narrative and visual techniques.

Different from Irigaray and Sultana, Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity, emphasizes how gender is not simply shown by media but actively constructed and restated through repetition of performances. In different book, that is *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler says that gender is not a fixed identity . It is a set of socially regulated performances that reinforce binary distinctions between masculinity and femininity. In addition, Film plays a critical role in this performative process, because it reflects and reinforces gendered expectations as well through imagery, framing, and characterization (Butler, 1990).

One of the feminist film theory, the male gaze, introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975), describes how women are positioned as passive subjects for male viewers. This phenomenon is reinforced by cinematographic techniques such as framing, lighting, and color palettes, which effectively shape gender dynamics.

Monden (2013) claims that Coppola uses dreamlike aesthetics and soft focus cinematography techniques to create a beautiful and ethereal atmosphere that connects with the sisters' critique and objectivity. The film's aesthetics with pastel tones and golden lighting present the Lisbon sisters as distant, untouchable figures rather than individuals with agency.

To support the analysis of cinematic techniques in *The Virgin Suicides*, this study also incorporates semiotic theory. According to Roland Barthes (1977), semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is constructed through signifiers (form) and signified (concept). In film analysis, semiotics helps decode visual codes such as costumes, color schemes, and mise-en-scène to reveal underlying cultural ideologies. Through this approach, visual elements are not only aesthetic choices but carry embedded meanings that reflect and reinforce gender norms. Therefore, semiotics serves as an analytical tool to interpret how the Lisbon sisters are framed and presented within a patriarchal visual discourse.

Butler's theory of gender performativity can be used to understand how the Lisbon Sisters' gender identities are formed through cinematography. The sisters are repeatedly captured in bedrooms, windows, and doorways, visually demonstrating a lack of agency, isolation, and a lack of standing outside of patriarchal structures. They not only represent oppression but also reiterate standards of passive and fragile femininity. As Monden (2013) explains, the film uses a soft focus cinematography technique, making them appear not as powerful figures, but rather as victims of performative gender.

### **B.1.3 Suicide as Performative Resistance**

Suicide, when connected through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, can be understood as a subversive act that challenges the expectations of social norms. In "Gender Trouble" (1990), Butler explains that gender is constructed through repeated social acts. These acts are controlled by

patriarchal structures, which create rigid roles and behaviors. According to Butler, the concept of performativity implies the repetition of norms, which opens up the possibility of subversion and resistance. In this context, suicide can be interpreted as a performative act that critiques these gender norms and reveals their oppressive nature (Butler, 1993).

The gendered aspect of suicide has been widely discussed in sociological and psychological studies. Canetto and Sakinofsky (1998) examined how suicide is often viewed in a gendered context. They noted that men and women are typically categorized based on their methods: men are associated with violent and overt methods, while women are associated with passive approaches such as poisoning or overdose. These patterns reflect cultural stereotypes of active, aggressive masculinity and passive, submissive femininity. Therefore, suicide can be seen as both a reflection of these social constructs and a break with them. It challenges the expectation that people should adhere to gender norms even in their most personal decisions, such as ending their own lives.

Judith Jaworski (2014) also includes to this discussion by criticizing traditional gender based interpretations of suicide that reduce the act to basic stereotypes. Jaworski underlines that suicide must be understood within a broader sociocultural and temporal context, as a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender discourse. From this perspective, suicide becomes a performative act that not only reflects the oppressive structures that shape individual identities but also critiques and resists them. This resistance is not merely symbolic, but operates within a framework that preserves oppression, thus revealing the paradoxical nature of gender norms.

Art historian Linda Nochlin (1978) expands this idea through the visual trope of the “fallen woman,” where female transgression—particularly sexual or social disobedience—is met with symbolic punishment, isolation, and ultimately erasure. This imagery, deeply embedded in Western cultural narratives, aligns with the portrayal of female suicidality as both a product of societal judgment

and a symbolic act of resistance. Suicide, in this context, becomes the final performance in a sequence of cultural scripts that mark deviant femininity for destruction.

By combining Butler's notion of gender performativity with insights from Canetto and Sakinofsky (1998) and Jaworski (2014), suicide can be understood as a complex performative resistance to societal expectations. It is not simply an individual act or a consequence of pathology; rather, it constitutes a critique of structures that prescribe conformity, particularly those rooted in patriarchal control. This theoretical framework allows for an analysis of suicide as both a deeply personal and deeply political act, revealing the intersections between individual agency and systemic oppression.

#### **B.1.4 Adolescence Suicide Phenomena**

During the 1970s, the era in which *The Virgin Suicides* is set, white American girls aged 13 to 17 experienced a period of intense vulnerability. This transitional age marks a liminal space between childhood and womanhood, where gender performativity becomes increasingly policed. Girls were expected to embody obedience, passivity, and sexual purity, while simultaneously navigating growing desires for agency and self-expression (Jeffreys, 1977). The clash between these societal demands and internal development often resulted in depression, anxiety, and a sense of entrapment, making suicide a tragic response to impossible ideals.

Historical data from the Centers for Disease Control (1987) confirm a rising trend in female adolescent suicide during this period, with suicide rates for white girls aged 15–19 increasing from 2.9 to 5.3 per 100,000 between 1970 and 1980. More recent longitudinal research also finds that girls, especially between ages 10–14, now die by suicide at higher rates than boys, highlighting the urgent need to examine the gendered roots of adolescent suicidality (Ruch et al., 2024). Cultural conformity, academic and social pressures, and limited emotional outlets

further intensify girls' psychological distress, especially when coupled with family conflict, trauma, and rigid expectations (Shakya et al., 2019). Mental health research further indicates that girls were more likely than boys to internalize distress via self-blame, low self-esteem, and self-harm, while also facing stricter gender norms that suppressed emotional expression and punished deviation from religious or moral expectations (Wichstrøm, 1999; Lenz, 2001). These forms of gendered suffering were particularly acute in suburban, religious households such as that of the Lisbon family.

Religiosity, often seen as a protective factor, had more complex implications for adolescent girls. According to Tettey (2014), intrinsic religiosity, such as prayer and personal faith, was protective only in early adolescence. By contrast, extrinsic religiosity, or religious participation driven by social expectations, was associated with increased psychological strain, especially for girls. Feelings of guilt and shame from failing to meet religious standards contributed to suicidal ideation. Notably, poor parental relationships—especially absent or emotionally distant fathers, were one of the strongest predictors of suicidal thoughts in adolescent girls, and in their absence, religious communities could only partially serve as emotional buffers.

These findings are supported by Lawrence et al. (2016), who discovered that depressed patients with strong religious affiliations were more likely to attempt suicide. Those who frequently attended religious services or placed high importance on religion reported greater suicidal ideation, suggesting that “negative religious coping” such as feelings of abandonment by God, spiritual guilt, or internalized shame can exacerbate mental health issues, especially in conservative religious environments.

Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994) argue that Christian theological traditions have historically portrayed women in dualistic terms: either as Eve—the source of temptation—or Mary—the ideal of obedience and purity. These symbolic

archetypes contribute to a theological framework that restricts female autonomy by linking womanhood with sin, sacrifice, and submission. Such narratives uphold religious expectations that frame female suffering and silence as virtuous, thereby reinforcing patriarchal control over the female body and moral identity. In this context, religious guilt and self-blame become not only psychological burdens but extensions of doctrinal control.

From a feminist perspective, scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) and bell hooks (2000) have emphasized how rigid gender roles and the suppression of emotional expression lead to psychological distress in girls. *The Virgin Suicides* offers a cinematic reflection of this reality, where the Lisbon sisters' isolation, repression, and eventual deaths reveal the tragic costs of patriarchal motherhood, strict religious control, and cultural silencing. These religiously rooted ideals of purity, obedience, and female sacrifice contributed to their emotional repression and internalized guilt, exacerbating their psychological distress and ultimately playing a role in their suicidality. Their suicides must be understood not solely as mental health crises, but as expressions of resistance to a system that denied them autonomy and voice. Suicide, in this context, emerges not just as a personal crisis but as resistance against systems that deny young women autonomy, expression, and care. To prevent such tragedies, as Diamond et al. (2021) suggest, interventions must address the sociocultural roots of girls' distress through education, family support, and mental health frameworks that affirm emotional complexity and gendered experience.

#### **B.1.5 Review of Related Research**

To demonstrate the validity of this research, it's important to review previous studies on topics such as suicide tendencies, gender, and mental health. This demonstrates that this study doesn't replicate existing research but rather provides new insights. Several studies have examined these topics, often from different media or theoretical perspectives.

In her study of "Girl, Interrupted" (1999), Middleton (2021) analyzes the portrayal of mental illness from a feminist perspective, focusing on the film's critique of the psychiatric system and societal expectations of women. The study highlights the stigmatization of women with mental illness, particularly those diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD), and demonstrates how these characters' struggles are framed within the context of societal pressures. This study is relevant because it examines gendered representations of mental health and critiques societal norms, this topics also central to the analysis of suicidality in the media.

Another relevant study is Patel & Ramaswamy's (2021) study, which analyzed the impact of suicidal ideation in the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why on adolescent mental health. The authors argue that the explicit depiction of suicide in the series may increase suicidal ideation in vulnerable viewers. This research highlights the importance of responsible media coverage of sensitive topics. This aligns with this study's interest in understanding how media depictions of suicidal ideation affect adolescent mental health and societal perceptions.

Furthermore, Rizky's (2022) study of gender inequality in "Little Women" (2019) examines Jo March's gendered experiences, focusing on the social expectations and constraints imposed by patriarchy. This study demonstrates how Jo's resistance to traditional gender roles critiques patriarchal structures. This aligns with the feminist theoretical framework applied in this study to understand gender oppression.

The related research above demonstrate that they address common themes: mental health, gender oppression, and suicidal tendencies, although from diverse media and theoretical perspectives. This study selects "The Virgin Suicides" to further explore these discussions. It analyzes gender dynamics in suicidal tendencies from different perspectives, focusing on the representation of gender performativity in contemporary narratives.