



**Ministry of Higher Education and  
Scientific Research  
University of Diyala  
College of Education for Humanities  
Department of English Language**



# **Suicidal Imagery from Feminist Perspective : An Analytical Study of Beth Henley's Selected Plays**

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Council of the College of Education for Humanities  
University of Diyala in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature**

**Submitted by:**

**Mathaar Haseeb Mahmoud**

**Supervised by:**

**Assist. Prof. Massarra Majid Ibrahim (M.A.)**

**June  
2021 A.D**

**Dhul Qadah  
1442 A.H**

## **ABSTRACT**

As a matter of fact, in the 1980s, female dramatists including Beth Henley adopted suicide as a form of individual and psychological cure. Consequently, the female characters of the 1980s, rebel against the degeneration of their surrounding in pursuit of autonomy. Thus, in many feminist plays of the 1980s, the refusal of feminine roles, which is forced on females by males, is portrayed as one of the main selections for women to get agency. However, females' conditions are so despairing that they are left with only self-destructive or suicidal ways to obtain freedom as seen in Beth Henley.

Henley (1952) is a great American and feminist playwright whose feminist impulses have appeared early in her life due to the influence of her mother who was a famous actress at the time. Throughout her plays, Henley deals with the problem of being a woman. She further portrays different images of women's suffering in American society, especially after World War II. Due to the patriarchal system and emotional confinement, women felt burdened and thus they trapped in suicide. As a matter of fact, women suffer from frustration, despair, helplessness and are subject to difficult circumstances. Beth Henley portrays female characters who have been motivated by risky acts to escape verbal and physical abuse. As a feminist, Henley shows how women suffered in their families and provided the prime location for their questions about identity, self-esteem and self-discovery through suicide. Indeed, they try their best to break free from the cruel and male-dominated society through intentional death which ultimately creates an act of freedom.

From the feminist perspective, the current study attempts to analyze suicidal imagery in Beth Henley's selected plays: *Crimes of the Heart* (1982), *Abundance* (1992) and *Impossible Marriage* (1999). However, the study falls into five chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction and a background as well as literature review. Chapter two is subdivided into three sections. The first section, "Beth Henley: Biography," introduces the background of the writer. The second section is entitled, "Beth Henley and Feminism,". Whereas the third section, "Beth Henley and Feminist Theatre," tackles the flowering of feminist theatre in modern times.

Chapter three is subdivided into four sections. The first section, "An Introduction to the Play," *Crimes of the Heart* shows the background of the play as well as the main reasons that inspired Henley to write her play. The second section, "The Magrath Mother's Suicide and Its Impact on her Daughters," shows that mother's suicide plays a negative impact on her daughters. The third section entitled, "The Patriarchal System and the Females' sense of Self-Destruction," addresses the effect of the patriarchal system on females' shaping their identity. While the fourth section entitled, "Sister Bond," addresses the reunion of Magrath's three sisters to overcome the effect of their mother's suicide.

Chapter four tackles Suicidal Inclinations in *Abundance* and *Impossible Marriage*. It is subdivided into two sections. The first section is entitled, "*Abundance*: Social Roles," which addresses women's suffering in this play and their desire to put an end to their lives. The second section, "*Impossible Marriage*: Autonomy and Freedom," addresses the mother-daughter relationship and the impact of the social expectations on female

characters in the southern community. It also shows the suicidal attempt of female characters as a reaction to social expectations.

Finally, chapter five is the conclusion in which the researcher briefly explains the main points resulted from the thesis in addition to recommendations.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction

Suicide is one of the major philosophical, ethical and religious problems throughout history. However, the critic and researcher, Manjeet Bhatia defines suicide as: “an act of self-inflicted, self-intentioned taking of one’s life” (2). Yet, another definition comes from Stincelli (2001): “Suicide is the intentional act of taking one’s own life, with a conscious awareness of both the effect and finality of the act” (41). Discussions about the acceptability of suicide and its own history, start with the Ancient Greece to the present day. Sir Thomas Browne, an academic is famous to be the first to use the word suicide in his work *Religio Medici* (1643). Moreover, it was being derived from the Latin words *sui* (of oneself) and *caedere*(to Kill) (Murray 44). During the Renaissance period, Shakespeare was known to have used suicide as a vital theme in his works such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1567), *Othello* (1603), *Hamlet* (1601), *Antony and Cleopatra*(1624). Accordingly, Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be or not to be” (Shakespeare, Act 3, Sc.1, P 55), can be understood as his musings on suicide as a stoic gesture. Rowland Wymer, in his work, *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama* (1986), shows that "Suicide was reacquiring the dignity and honor of its Roman past, but had not lost its medieval connotation of shame and despair" (2).

Numerous Western feminists showed that the term suicidal imagery was introduced in the 18th century. During the eighteenth century, many female authors considered suicide a literary theme “death was the great inspire event” ( Everett 13). They further showed that

suicide was fashionable “we live in an age of suicide”(Johnson 42). However, during the nineteenth century, suicide had become one of the most important themes to select by female authors since women’s suicide became a cultural obsession. The impulse for suicide was the development of modern literature. Women writers such as Kate Chopin used suicide as a means to get freedom in the patriarchal society. In her novel *The Awakening* (1889), Chopin showed that suicide was a way to escape from the patriarchy and finally be free. Clearly, Chopin confirmed that many reasons were at work to make women put an end for their own lives such as suffering and pressures practised by traditional society. Chopin’s main character was a woman who suffered from a loveless marriage, therefore, she committed suicide (9).

Suicide among female authors could also have been an ethic-political choice due to an interest towards autonomy and a dream to run away from the patriarchy (Blatter 55). In 1897, Emile Durkheim, published his important work *The Suicide*. Durkheim explained that the current industrialization increased women’s suicide in the world since it contributed to the feelings of isolation and disconnectedness (qtd. in Henricks 33). While the twentieth century was an age steeped in symptoms of despair and depression. Therefore, the central theme that dominated literature was suicide.

Furthermore, suicide has been an important theme, especially in modern American drama as is seen in Arthur Miller’s plays such as *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of Salesman* (1949). During that period, namely after WW II, suicide was the means for escaping the meaninglessness of life. Throughout the 1980s, female playwrights including Henley, Marsha Norman and others were relying on suicide as a vital theme in order to overcome the feeling of hopelessness that

women have experienced in an attempt to retain their will and break free from restriction of the male dominated society .Although regarded as a destructive image, suicide begins to be realized as a means of revolt against men to retain women’s autonomy (Brombert 34). According to William Demastes “Death does not negate the idea that [a woman] exercises her will to the last by deciding what will become of her life. Not she chooses to die , but she chooses to die . Therefore, if there is advocacy which it is certainly not in favor of death, but in favor of autonomy” (151- 52). Accordingly, many feminist writers have tackled suicide as the main theme in their writings like Sylvia Plath’s *Bell Jar* (1963) and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). So, they reveal complex and fragmented life due to traditions shaped by the male-controlled society with the result that female characters look for suicide as a means to get freedom “feeling of freedom in every view”(Alvarez 81).

In terms of the patriarchal system, females were treated as an oppressed class and their lives have been controlled by male domination. The correlation between a female and a man has been one of control and sub-ordinance. It has come to be the “birthright priority” of males to be dominant over females and this has become established in our social order. In so far as women are silenced subjects through generations, suicide is used as a tool, a weapon to express anger, fear, and disagreement. Moreover, factors that lead to suicide arise from the person’s psychological strain attributed to the break-up of family bonds, the clash between inner and outer life, betrayal in wedding, hypocrisy in human relationships, nostalgic recreations of the past, jealousies and petty conflicts in inter- personal relations, the gap between the fantasy world and the real, psychological shocks and isolation (Burnham 33). Women

also are made to consent the patriarchal image of the feminine as their own. “Women” as Simone De Beauvoir says “still dream through the dreams of men” (74). Culture is so saturated with male bias that women almost have no chance to perceive life from a feminine point of view, and to consent as standard and legitimate, a feminine system of principles. Women look at community through the logo centric, male-oriented version that has been accepted as the cosmopolitan and democratic view of mankind. As a result, patriarchy appears to be a large contributing cause to despair and suicide (Silkenat 44).

From the feminist point of view, Diane Bonds shows woman’s misery and depression as an insufferable psychic conflict which leads to suicide. Also, she confirms that alienation, as one of the major factors leading women to commit suicide (57). The masculine birthright of superordination has pervaded into the culture, literature, arts, humanities, education, law, folklore, anthropology and all other realms of life. A feminine society is ruled by patriarchs with its male-oriented principles that subjugate women socially, economically and politically. This oppressive power structured the patriarchal system which has become the most pervasive ideology of our culture to dictate the fate of women (Lipsett 15- 25). However, Beth Henley is one of the most important figures in American drama who has dealt with suicidal imagery as a means to get freedom. Also, she claims that women deliberately resolve to suicide to put an end to their suffering as most feminist psychoanalysts hold that women overwhelmed with feelings of self-hatred, depression consequently, reveals suicidal inclination. Further, according to the feminist critic, Margaret Higonnet shows that: “[w]omen’s voluntary deaths are even more difficult to read than men’s because women’s very autonomy is in question and their intentions are therefore opaque” (68).



All Henley's female characters also attempt to control their sense of selfhood, in an effort to unite themselves with autonomy. Therefore, Henley's plays show how American female playwrights of the twentieth century lead the drama of rebellion showing and calling for reforming the social status of women's resistance and protest against the conventions. As a feminist, Henley, along with many female dramatists, created defiant characters who become eccentric, criminals, or demonstrators. Thus, as an essential genre of drama, feminist drama selected suicide as a vital theme to make the whole world more interested in women's rights (Kachur 15- 39).

Therefore, Beth Henley has used suicide as a type of individual and psychological recovery, to discover a way that females use to struggle against unfair society. Frequently, Henley's main characters are always females who are all "fragile introvert trapped in their own skin" (Mehta 151). Henley considers carefully that her duty is to grant a voice. She regards suicide as a call for her woman's identity and independence despite the negative impact it leaves on others. To make her dramatic framework more believable and satisfactory, she sometimes injects her protagonist's suicidal efforts with a remaining optimism in life particularly for those who survive their tries (Demastes 140).

### **The Problem of the Study**

The current study tackles the theme of suicidal imagery in selected plays by the American playwright Beth Henley *Crimes of the Heart* (1982), *Abundance* (1992) and *Impossible Marriage* (1999). The study is based on the feminist movement in accordance with which society and family are held responsible for women's suicide. Also, suicidal imagery may result out of depression, suffering, lack of identity

and others causes which further contributed to women's suicide. Therefore, this study focuses on these causes and the way they have affected women's lives in society. The researcher, therefore, refers to three modern plays in which suicidal imagery is the main theme.

## **The Hypothesis of the Study**

As the current study depends on feminist movement in tackling suicidal imagery manifest in selected plays of Beth Henley, it hypothesizes that society and family are mainly responsible for females' suicidal actions. Besides, focus is centred on other factors including depression, loneliness, lack of identity and lack of human rights which have contributed to women's suicide. Sister bond is argued as an encouraging factor to lessen women's depression, loneliness and subsequent suicidal attempts.

## **Thesis Statement**

Suicidal imagery and its consequences are the core points in *Crimes of the Heart*, *Abundance* and *Impossible Marriage*. The study adopted feminist movement and its perceptions by scholars, critics and researchers in an attempt to analyze suicidal imagery and inclinations female characters display in the above mentioned plays.

## **Methodology**

The study mainly depends on a thematic approach through analytical explanations and reviewing the theme of suicidal imagery in three selected plays by Beth Henley *Crimes of the Heart*, *Abundance* and *Impossible Marriage*. The thesis sheds much light on feminist movement which is widely adopted in the modern period by many female

playwrights like Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, Ntozake Shang and many others.

The study follows the MLA style in formatting the thesis study and depends on primary and secondary sources of full documentations.

## **Literature Review**

Suicide has been an important theme to shape many literary works since earlier centuries. It has further attracted the attention of many female writers, critics and investigators since the twentieth century up to now. As matter of fact, in 1980, several female playwrights have adapted this theme in an attempt to expose the feeling of hopelessness women experience in the traditional society. Women, whose identity and independence have been long seized by their families and the conventional system in their society, maintain suicide as the only outlet available to escape severe male authority.

The current study tackles this theme, from the feminist point of view, as manifest in selected plays by the American playwright, Beth Henley while shedding light on different factors which contributed to females suicide. The study also discusses the negative effect of suicide, destructive as it is on females' characters and family relationships.

*The Plays of Beth Henley: A Critical Study* (2014) by Gene Plunka is one of the most important studies on Henley and her plays. The book presents an introduction to Henley's life. In addition, it focuses on different themes such as madness, tragicomic vision, the suffering of women, self-discovery and the eccentricities of southern culture. Most importantly, this book shows how Henley portrays the absurdity of modern life and the existential misery expressed in many forms of what Freud calls the modern neurosis. It further shows the concept of the

modern *angoisse* adopted in Freud's civilization and its discontents. Accordingly, Henley's main characters are considered in the light of Freud's suggestion that cultural constraints produce anxious people. The researcher, on occasions, depends on this book in analyzing Henley's selected plays: *Crimes of the Heart*, *Abundance* and *Impossible Marriage*.

Julia A Fesmire's book *Beth Henley: A Casebook* (2014), includes a collection of essays that present a critical analysis of Henley's plays. Throughout the book, many themes are analyzed like identity, homicidal imagery and southern standards. Also, the book presents how Henley uses the term "grotesque" in her plays as well as the dark humor to show people's suffering. It further argues the meaningless life for women due to the patriarchal system. Throughout the study, however, the researcher uses this book by providing critical analysis of Henley's selected plays: *Crimes of the Heart*, *Abundance* and *Impossible Marriage* from the feminist perspective.

In a thesis entitled *The Ethereal State: Weddings in Modern American Feminist Drama* (2010), by Andrea J. Cody from Stony Brook University presents marriage as the main theme. The study shows the effect of loveless marriage on woman's lives which resulted in fear and suffering. Furthermore, the researcher discusses the relationship between socio-economic situations and wedding, explaining how economic realities report to females' experiences of marriage. He shows that Henley's play *Impossible Marriage* (1999), reflects the tension between societal standards and individual wishes emphasizing the existence of true love opposed to the social challenges. At best, however, the study shows that true love gives endless happiness and makes up for past sadness. While the current study discusses the play in a different way.

The study also focuses on the conflict between civilization and desire for women characters which leads to self-destruction and suicidal ideas.

In his study, *Southern Aspects in Beth Henley's Crimes of the Heart, The Wake of Jamey Foster and The Miss Firecracker Contest* (2004), the researcher Yasser Fouad Abdelallah from South Valley University, focuses on Henley as a southern playwright. He shows that Henley represents a new generation of southern playwrights who are committed to preserve the southern culture on the American stage. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore particular southern aspects in *Crimes of the Heart* (1982). The play represents the southern background of Henley and her embrace of the southern literary tradition as the quirky reflection of the sense of place and family culture of southern women. In the current study, the researcher examines the historical background in further details with references to Beth Henley's feminist perspective as reflected in her selected plays wherein suicide is the main focus.

The researcher Li Jing, from Hong Kong Baptist University, explores the theme of women's spiritual and psychological crises in society in his thesis, *Self in Community: Twentieth-century American Drama by Women* (2016). *Crimes of the Heart* by Henley has chosen to present this theme. The researcher shows that Henley's female characters have faced many crises which lead them to become criminals as exemplified by Babe who tries to kill her husband. This study highlights how women interact with different dominant, geographical, racial, or ethnic female cultures and challenge them.

The study demonstrates that when women develop their psychological bond, they will succeed in establishing their personhood, through relying on themselves and on communal relations among them.

The three sisters then succeed to free themselves from the chains of social-moral beliefs and fight for survival. However, in the current study, Jing focuses on suicidal imagery as the main theme and how the three sisters attempt to commit suicide in order to escape from unfair society. Thus, the researcher presents the theme of sister bond which helps to challenge the sisters' problems and lessen their suicidal inclination.

Zeynep Kayhan's thesis, *The Female Character's Tragedies and Struggles in Beth Henley's Plays* (2011), from the University of Fatih, investigated the reasons and states of Henley's female characters' tragedies. She shows how females suffer from the patriarchal system. Also, the study shows that rebellion against patriarchal figures will be the first step towards happiness. Accordingly, each female succeeds in overcoming her problems with these men. In addition to what have been mentioned earlier, the study presents several concepts such as Southern gothic, grotesque and disability in detail. Unlike the above mentioned study, the current study focuses on female's tragedies In *Crimes of the Heart* as mainly resulted from their mother's suicide from the feminist perspective.

Moreover, in the thesis *Staging the Sex Wars: Contemporary American playwrights through the prism of Feminism Conflict* (1999), the researcher Cynthia Hanworthy from the University of Cape Town (UCT), explores several themes of Henley's *Abundance*. briefly argues the effect of war on people particularly female characters. Hanworthy also presents the conflict among people due to money. At the same time, however, the researcher argues the influence of capture on women like Bess who suffers when she is arrested by Indian men. Furthermore, the study also examines Bess's isolation and loneliness in a strange community and how her appearance has been changed because of the

high degrees. Finally, this thesis focuses on people's right for rejecting the war because it only causes suffering and death. In the current study, the researcher addresses the suffering of women in the traditional society which leads them to suicidal ideas in order to escape from hardships attributed to loveless marriage.

The researcher Heba Mohammed from the University of Al Fayoum, dissertation entitled *Self-Discovery and the Break Away from Naturalism in Some Selected Plays of Beth Henley* (2018), focuses on Henley's female protagonists who struggle for self-discovery while breaking away from the conventional idea of naturalism. The study focuses on the psychological impact on female characters in *Crimes of the Heart* and *Impossible Marriage*. She shows in *Impossible Marriage*, how Henley's naturalistic play portrays the struggle between the inner self and the outer world. Henley shows how female characters such as Pandora and Floral suffer a long time due to social norms. They attempt to improve their standard of living, yet their efforts are useless due to forces out of their control. That is why the two sisters are always imitating a negative view of the southern community. Moreover, the social standards refer to Pandora and Floral as helpless victims of some conditions and inner stresses they cannot understand or control.

While in *Crimes of the Heart*, the study presents Beth Henley's unconventional naturalistic outlook of human beings by adapting naturalism to modernism in *Crimes of the Heart*, Henley turns from being a conventional naturalist by presenting a story of three sisters who suffer from the cultural norms. To study the naturalistic features in *Crimes of the Heart*, the researcher shows the circumstances of the three sisters as uneducated or barely educated. Moreover, they cannot decide their

values, beliefs, or aims instead they are ready to accept the definition of others even though they are false or forged.

Heba shows that Henley is classified as a naturalistic playwright. She employs the naturalistic style of writing in an attempt to present the hardships of the sisters' lives. In the current study, in *Crimes of the Heart*, the researcher presents the theme of suicidal imagery from the feminist point of view with reference to conditions that force the sisters to destroy themselves. Furthermore, she presents the struggle between the ghost of their mother's suicide and the sisters' present lives. In *Impossible Marriage*, the study shows how the severity of southern traditions shapes the characters' actions, conventional appearances and masks complicated realities because the female character's innate desires are often in conflict with the societal roles which lead to a strange feeling of isolation and suicidal inclinations.

The dissertation *Representation of the Family In Southern Drama: Before and After the Civil Right Women's Movement* (2002), by Anna Marla Filippo from the University of Georgia investigates the role of family as a vital part of southern community. She presents the history of Southern families in the 20th century. Most importantly, this study discusses the role of Southern family in Henley's plays such as *Crimes of the Heart* and *Impossible Marriage*. Furthermore, The study also examines how the family has affected the female characters in Southern society. Moreover, the researcher shows that Henley is one of the female playwrights who explored the relationship between the family and its effect on women's lives in American drama. Filippo shows that *Crimes of the Heart* sheds light on family's violence towards women exemplified by Babe's husband who abused her. Thus, Henley's female characters are



not in line with conventions. Instead, they fight against the restriction of ladylike conduct that is often portrayed by their mothers.

While in *Impossible Marriage*, the study shows the effect of family on females such as Kandall, a woman who plays an important role in her daughters' lives. She cannot understand her daughters' actions. Obviously, Kandall embodies the traditional standards of the southern family whereas her daughters try to fight against those similar traditions, the role of the obedient females is changed by females who are not fulfilled with what their mothers want. Finally, this dissertation discusses the relationship between the family and the female character who struggles for a happy life. In the current study, however, the researcher presents the relationship between the family and women characters and how the family contributed to women's suicidal attempts.

The researcher Esraa Jalal Jawad from University of Baghdad in her dissertation *The Use Off Stage Characters In Selected Twentieth-Century American Plays* (2014), shows the main goal is to display the impact of the offstage characters on forming the onstage characters' psychology and their opinion. The study discusses how the offstage characters indicate and explain significant cultural characteristics of the twentieth century as revealed in Henley's plays through family relationships. Also, she explains the effect of offstage character in *Crimes of the Heart* (1982). Also, this study explores the psychological and social effects on female characters in *Crimes of the Heart* (1982). Unlike the above mentioned study, the current study discusses the off-stage characters represented by the Magrath mother and the three sisters' grandfather and how they have impacted the three sisters negatively and motivated their desire for suicide.

The current study notably differs from Kristin Hanson's dissertation entitled *Stage(d) Mothers: Mother-Daughter Tropes in Twentieth-Century American Drama* (2001), from Louisiana State University in which the researcher presents an important work written by Beth Henley exemplified by *Crimes of the Heart* (1982). However, the majority of this study focuses on how Beth Henley portrays the mother-daughter relationship tropes in the modern age. The study, therefore, discusses one of Henley's plays, *Crimes of the Heart* in relation to the American conception of standards. To know how to be a positive character in society, daughters always look at their mothers as ideal people. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Henley presents the absent mother and her negative impact on her daughters. The three sisters suffer from their absent mother since they live a meaningless life without maternal love and care. However, the mother's absence strengthened male authority. In the current study, the researcher highlights the reasons held responsible for the mother's suicide and the negative effect it has on the three sisters' lives.

The current thesis is considerably different from Raaid Salah's dissertation *An Ontological Study of Female Characters in Selected Plays by Beth Henley* (2016), Mansoura University in which Salah focuses on identity in Henley's selected plays; *Crimes of the Heart*, *Abundance*, and *The Miss Firecracker Contest*. The researcher showed how Henley deals with the existential question of being an American southern female dramatist. Moreover, this study portrays different images of American females suffering from female spousal rivalry, patriarchal system, and emotional imprisonment. The researcher explains how Henley's female characters struggle in order to get their identity. This thesis shows Henley's success to discover the ontological study in her plays and how

each female character can achieve her identity. Unlike the above mentioned thesis, the current study sheds light on suicide or the suicidal attempt of female characters namely the sisters Babe and Meg as a means of rebellion against traditions. As far as *Abundance* is concerned, the current study shows the way women desire suicide as a result of being trapped in a loveless marriage.