



**WHEN MOTHERHOOD IS UNDER SURVEILLANCE :
MATERNAL LOVE AND STATE POWER IN
JESSAMINE CHAN'S *THE SCHOOL FOR
GOOD MOTHERS***

Muhammad Bilal Saqlain
bilalsaqlain7@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Riphah
International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Sanniya Batool
sanniya.batool@riphahfsd.edu.pk

Senior lecturer, Department of English Literature, Riphah
International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Muhammad Abubakar Jamil
muhammadabubakr7866@gmail.com

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Riphah
International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

This paper looks into the ways in which *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) by Jessamine Chan describes motherhood as a place of state surveillance and institutional control. Based on the works of Michel Foucault on the theories of surveillance, discipline and biopolitics, as well as feminist theories of motherhood, the research paper is an examination of how the maternal love and caregiving is turned into a regulated and measurable behavior. The article argues in a quite close text study that the novel not only represents motherhood as a regulated action managed by the state apparatus but also subjecting mothers to a strict criteria of care and emotional conduct. It is a commentary on the current parenting trend as it illustrates how anxiety, self-policing and loss of maternal autonomy are created through surveillance, bureaucracy and gendered expectations. Finally, the research shows that the motherly love turns out to be one of the major processes by which the institutional force controls the lives of women.

Keywords: *Biopolitics, Emotional Governance, Feminist Dystopia, Institutional Motherhood, Jessamine Chan, Maternal Surveillance, State Control.*

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Bilal Saqlain (MPhil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Pakistan)
Email: bilalsaqlain7@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Modern dystopianism is more and more a symptom of social fear of surveillance, institutional power and subjugation of individual life under regimes of technological and bureaucratic dominance. In this literary environment, the theme of motherhood has come out as an important point of discussion in the regulation of gendered identities by the political, cultural and ideological frameworks. Latest feminist dystopian fiction questions the subjugation of female flesh, as well as the control of maternal actions, emotionality and reproductive accountability. *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) by Jessamine Chan is no exception as it is a contribution to this emerging tradition where motherhood is turned into a subject of constant state surveillance and punishment. The novel criticizes modern social norms where mothers are held constantly responsible to the physical, emotional and developmental well-being of their children through the way it instantiates institutionalized parenting reform (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003; Foucault, 1977).

Jessamine Chan is an American novelist and writer whose writings have explored modern-day issues of motherhood, gender, race, social expectations, and institutional power. *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) is her first novel that explores how a society where maternal behavior is subjected to institutional judgment and surveillance would work out. In the character of Frida Liu, Chan explores the pressures put on mothers to meet socially constructed ideals of care, responsibility and emotional behavior. The portrayal of motherhood by Chan thus offers a valuable literary platform on which one can explore how intimate maternal associations may be subjected to larger practices of social and political domination.

The novel takes place in a dystopian America, in the near future, where Frida Liu, a single mother, commits a parenting error that forces the state to intervene and enroll her in a governmental rehabilitation program that will turn her into a good mother. The institution of the center of the story is not only a rightful educational establishment but an instrument of control that oversees, judges and punishes maternal conduct on the basis of strict ideological norms. It is on this premise that Chan reveals the way motherhood is controlled using the mechanisms of observation, performance and emotional regulation. Maternal affection in the novel ceases to be perceived as a private or individual event, but is turned into a publicly quantifiable category which is subject to bureaucratic evaluation and political criticism. In this regard, the novel is representative of larger issues about the proliferation of surveillance culture into intimate aspects of human existence (Chan, 2022).

The image of motherhood in the novel appeals greatly to the modern discussions about intensive parenting and institutional motherhood. Researchers have pointed out that contemporary motherhood is more determined by unrealistic social pressures that require women to work round the clock, self-sacrificially and be the perfect moral agents (Hays,

1996). Mothers in neoliberal societies are usually placed on the frontline of social outcomes and at the same time, they are under the social eyes and a disciplinary judgment. Chan enhances such cultural interactions with dystopian hyperbole and shows how state institutions weaponize maternal care, turning affection into a performance that is monitored. The novel thus is not only a critique of authoritarian rule, but also of the social structures in place that legitimize the surveillance of the parenting behaviors of women.

The literature on *The School for Good Mothers* has been mostly biased towards feminist dystopianism, racialized motherhood, male demands and reproductive anxiety. Critics have explored how the novel explores Asian American motherhood, neoliberal culture of parenting and the emotional baggage that women endure in the modern domestic formations. Other analyses have placed the text in the context of larger traditions of feminist speculative fiction, which challenges patriarchal authority over female bodies and reproductive agency. Although the methods offer good understanding of the cultural and political aspects of the novel, relatively little has been given on how maternal affection as such is made a subject of state surveillance and biopolitical control. Emotional aspects of institutional control especially monitoring love, care, attachment and maternal intimacy are not well investigated in the current criticism (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003; Collins, 2000; Glenn, 1994).

This paper fills that important gap by discussing the ways in which *The School for Good Mothers* makes the maternal love a category based on politics of regulation and discipline. The following questions are posed in the article: How does the novel reflect maternal affection as an object of institutional surveillance? How does the state govern motherhood by means of surveillance, normalization and emotional regulation? And how does institutional control reorganize the maternal identity, agency and emotional experience in the story? Answering these questions, the paper places the novel by Chan in larger theoretical discourses of surveillance culture, feminist dystopian novels and biopolitical governance.

The article uses the theories of surveillance, discipline and biopower of Michel Foucault as the main theoretical base but also refer to the feminist theories of institutional motherhood created by Adrienne Rich and Sharon Hays. The methodology of the research is based on qualitative textual analysis and close reading of the main narrative moments showing how disciplinary power works in the institutional frameworks of the novel. The importance of this work is that it adds to the current research on feminist dystopia and surveillance literature by presupposing the control of the love of mothers as a major process of state power. The article is organized in the following way: the following part of the article is a review of the literature on the novel, surveillance theory and feminist motherhood studies; the theoretical framework and methodology is then discussed. The analysis section then proceeds to look at the issues of maternal surveillance, institutional

discipline, emotional regulation and biopolitical control in more detail before ending with a reflection as to how the novel has more generally criticized the parenting culture and state government of the day.

1.1. Critical Scholarship on *The School for Good Mothers*

Published in 2022, *The School for Good Mothers* by Jessamine Chan has received significant scholarly and critical interest due to its consideration of the issue of motherhood, surveillance, institutional power and emotional control in modern society. The majority of the critical commentaries place the novel in the tradition of feminist dystopian fiction that explores the ways social institutions control the identities, bodies and childbearing of women (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003; Atwood, 1985). Researchers have highlighted how the novel criticizes the culture of modern parenting, especially the expectations placed on women to meet unrealistic expectations of care, attentiveness and emotional work. These readings imply that Chan reveals that motherhood is a social role that is under much scrutiny where women have to enact idealized versions of care giving as they remain susceptible to social critique and institutional intervention (Douglas and Michaels, 2004).

The racialized motherhood depicted in the novel has been the subject of a large amount of scholarship, especially the experiences of Frida Liu as an Asian American mother who has been attempting to negotiate the structures of authority that are filled with normative beliefs about the family, competence and responsibility. Researchers in the field of Asian American studies have contended that minority mothers tend to be under greater scrutiny due to the fact that the dominant cultural discourses tend to equate ideal parenting with the white middle-class standards (Collins, 2000; Glenn, 1994). By way of her experiences, Frida, Chan demonstrates how racialized mothers are disproportionately exposed to institutional judgment and scrutiny. These readings place the novel in the context of wider debates of race, gender and state power, where disciplinary practices are unevenly distributed among various social groups.

The other notable field of critical analysis is the way in which the novel has addressed modern surveillance culture. Recent research has seen *The School for Good Mothers* as a literary reaction to the increasing concerns about the collection of data, surveillance of behavior and bureaucracy in contemporary societies. Surveillance thinkers state that modern organizations are more and more dependent on monitoring and judgment to influence how people behave and uphold social conventions (Andrejevic, 2007). In the dystopian world of Chan, parenting is an area of constant evaluation in which the competence of the mother is gauged by institutionalized criteria. Critics observe that surveillance in the novel does not act as simple observational action but as the internalisation of evaluative expectations, which make mothers control themselves in line with proposed definitions of correct conduct.

Moreover, the novel is also related to the general discussions on neoliberalism about governance and individual responsibility. The concept of neoliberalism tends to interpret social issues as problems of personal failure instead of structural inequality and hold the individual and not the institution, accountable both to success and health (Brown, 2015). In the parenting culture, this reasoning makes mothers the main responsible of the development of their children and downplay the role of economic, social and structural circumstances. Chan intensifies such dynamics by making his story about a society where maternal misdeeds are seen as ethical failures that need to be corrected through the institutions. The novel, therefore, exposes how accountability structures often serve to uphold unequal expectations and heighten the pressures on women.

Although there has been an expanding literature on *The School for Good Mothers*, little has been said about how maternal affection and state surveillance relate. Ongoing research is often focused on institutional discipline, gender expectations and racialized parenting, but emotional attachment is often viewed as a secondary outcome, but not the primary target of political intervention. How maternal love, care and intimacy are monitored, evaluated and standardised is a relatively under-researched process. Such a gap implies that the process of the incorporation of emotional life as such into the systems of institutional regulation and disciplinary control should be investigated more closely.

1.2. Surveillance Theory and Biopolitical Governance

Surveillance discussions that have been presented theoretically offer a valuable approach towards the institutional processes as manifested in *The School for Good Mothers*. Michel Foucault and *Discipline and Punish* (1977) are one of the most impactful works on surveillance studies, with his reflection on disciplinary power. According to Foucault, instead of using a physical force, the modern institutions enforce the social order by means of constant observation, normalization and self-regulation. His panopticism concept explains how a system where people internalize the surveillance and start monitoring themselves is acquired since they believe that they will be observed at any given time. When this occurs, power is psychological and diffuse and it influences the conduct through the anticipation and self-discipline instead of coercion.

The Foucaultian theories have been extensively used in the research of modern-day governance, education, healthcare and family life. Surveillance academics believe that surveillance is moving outside the prison and governmental institutions to social activities and establishing cultures where people are subjects of permanent assessment (Lyon, 2007; Gandy, 1993). This argument is further expanded by Deleuze (1992) in his idea of the so-called societies of control where surveillance functions are carried out in a continuous manner with the help of flexible networks of monitoring and behavioral control. Instead of using fixed institutions, contemporary power operates based on scattered systems that categorize, evaluate and control behavior. Such theoretical outlooks are especially

applicable to the novel by Chan, in which even the motherhood will be evaluated and corrected by the institution.

The biopolitics further sheds light on the state power and maternal control. Foucault (1978) in *The History of Sexuality* believes that in the modern states there is an increasing tendency to control the population via the regulation of life processes including health, reproduction, family structures and bodily behavior. Biopower not only works by laws and regulations but also institutions defining norms of what is acceptable behavior and social responsibility. Such discussions have seen their elaboration by scholars like Agamben (1998) and Esposito (2008) who have shown how contemporary political regimes control life with the help of classification, inclusion and exclusion practices. In the mode of motherhood, biopolitical governance works by determining the ideal ways of parenting and defining deviations which must be intervened or corrected.

According to Rose (1999), the contemporary form of governance is more and more based on psychological knowledge and self-control, which means that people are encouraged to internalise institutional demands and govern themselves in such a way. On the same note, Lupton (2011) observes that surveillance activities tend to have emotional implications of anxiety, guilt, self consciousness and fear of being judged. In the novel Chan creates, these processes are especially apparent as the mother feels a constant doubt about her ability and her ability to feel. The act of expression itself is a space of control and demonstrates the expansion of surveillance into the intimate spheres of human life.

1.3. Feminist Theories of Motherhood and Institutional Control

Another valuable framework to the dynamics that are reflected in *The School for Good Mothers* is feminist scholarship on motherhood. Adrienne Rich and her *Of Woman Born* (1976) are one of the most powerful cries in this direction, separating motherhood as an experience (and motherhood as an institution). According to Rich, though the relationships between mothers may be vital and empowering, in patriarchal societies, motherhood is turned into a social control mechanism that enslaves women with limiting demands. Institutional motherhood characterizes women in terms of sacrifice, devotion and selflessness thus constraining the autonomy of women and strength of gender hierarchies (Rich, 1976).

The insights of these authors are developed by Sharon Hays (1996) who presents another concept called intensive mothering a dominant ideology according to which mothers are supposed to give a great number of emotional, psychological and material resources to child-rearing. Hays suggests that the modern-day parenting culture describes successful motherhood as a full time job that requires full time monitoring, emotional responsiveness and self-sacrifice. Later researchers have claimed that intensive mothering makes overly high expectations and imposes excessively high pressure on women in terms of their children development and well-being (Faircloth, 2014; Lee et al., 2014). These

cultural pressures are exaggerated in Chan novel by dystopian institutional frameworks which judge mothers by unattainable emotional and behavioral ideals.

The feminist theorists have also explored the ways in which motherhood gets entangled with the system of governance, social control and reproductive regulation. According to scholars like Collins (2000), Glenn (1994) and O'Reilly (2016), motherhood is not a homogenous experience but one that is created depending on race, nationality, class and social status. Institutional determinations of maternal competence are often based on the larger social inequalities, which leads to greater suspicion of marginalized mothers. Such views are especially applicable to the experiences of Frida Liu, as the novel illustrates how the institutional power is intertwined with the social assumptions about gender, ethnicity and parental responsibility.

The other important theme in the feminist motherhood research is that of emotional labor. Basing on the pioneering work of Hochschild (1983), researchers support the idea that women tend to take emotions under control, not only their own, but also those of others. Emotional labor in the context of motherhood is patience, empathy, attentiveness and emotional stability no matter the conditions of the individual. These demands are often the cause of maternal guilt, anxiety and fatigue (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; O'Reilly, 2016). These issues are echoed in the story Chan tells because motherhood in the story Chan tells is an experience that is characterized by emasculating emotional investigation and institutional disapproval. The novel is thus in line with feminist criticism that shows that the maternal identity is formed in relation to the disciplinary expectations as opposed to individual agency.

1.4. Emotional Governance and the Regulation of Intimacy

Scholarship of recent has also been paying more and more attention to the interaction between governance and emotion, in the claim that not only behavior, but also affective experience, is regulated by institutions. Emotional governance is a term used by scholars to refer to how the processes of feeling, attachment and expression of emotions are molded by social norms and institutional demands (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011). The functioning of emotional governance is based on what emotions are acceptable, how they are to be manifested and in which cases they can be regarded as legitimate.

In the modern parenting societies, emotional regulation is especially pronounced in the conception of maternal affection and bonding. It is often expected that mothers show unconditional devotion, patience and emotional availability irrespective of individual challenges and structural limitations (Faircloth, 2014). These expectations change the aspect of affection to a social duty and not a personal experience. These cultural norms have been said to lead to increased levels of self-monitoring and emotional self-control among mothers (Lupton, 2011; Lee et al., 2014).

Emotional life regulation has gained a lot of importance in the surveillance societies. Emotional expression per se is also subject to evaluation and judgment as institutions gain the ability to monitor behavior (Rose, 1999). Modern systems of governance often base their decisions on psychological parameters, behavioral parameters and affective parameters in establishing competence, accountability and social fitness. In the novel by Chan this reasoning is pushed to its dystopian conclusion when the love of mothers is turned into a quantifiable standard, by which the parenting capacity is evaluated. The novel thus offers an excellent literary portrayal of emotional governance working on surveillance, normalization and institutional power.

1.5. Research Gap

Despite the fact that the literature on *The School for Good Mothers* has focused on the analysis of feminist dystopia, institutional motherhood, racialized parenting and the surveillance culture, relatively limited focus has been given to the question of how maternal affection itself gets regulated by the system of state control and emotional regulation. Most of the existing literature is predominantly concerned with external disciplinary frameworks without much emphasis on how love, care and emotional attachment can be transformed into quantifiable performances which can be bureaucratized and normalized. This paper fills that gap by examining the love of mothers as one of the main areas of biopolitical control and disciplinary power in the novel using Foucauldian theories of surveillance and feminist theories of institutional maternity.

2. Theoretical Framework: Surveillance, Biopolitics and Institutional Motherhood

In this paper, the theories of surveillance, discipline and biopolitics of Michel Foucault are used as the main theoretical framework of the paper to analyze the institutionalization of motherhood in *The School for Good Mothers* by Jessamine Chan. Foucaultian theory is a critical methodology that offers a means through which contemporary regimes of power operate based on observation, normalisation and psychological self-control instead of relying on pure physical coercion alone. In modern societies, surveillance has gone beyond the boundaries of prisons and government to the personal life and influences the behavior of individuals due to constant assessment and disciplinary demands. In the motherhood context, these mechanisms are specifically important since maternal identity is under the growing social question, institutional control and ideological control (Foucault, 1977).

The main component of Foucault is the idea of panopticism that was presented in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and explains the system of surveillance where people learn to observe themselves and start controlling their behavior expecting to be judged by the institution. The role of power in the panoptic model is most effective when the surveillance is internalized and not apparent. People punish themselves as they live in the fear of being spied on. In *The School for Good Mothers*, this process is revealed in the institutional

supervision of maternal behavior, emotional expression and care giving practices. The mothers in the novel constantly control themselves as per the expectations of the state under the threat of punishment, separation and failure in case they do not act in terms of the officially accepted norms of parenting. Surveillance is thus not just a process of external observation but a process that re-organizes maternal subjectivity itself(Foucault, 1977).

The paper also relies on the idea of Foucault about biopolitics which describes the way modern states take control over the bodies, population, health and reproduction (Foucault, 1978). Biopolitical systems regulate life by setting standards on what behavior is acceptable, productive and socially responsible. Instead of enforcing only legal power, biopower operates through institutions, which taxonomize, govern and discipline people based on ideological principles. In the novel, motherhood is transformed into a biopolitical category which can be evaluated institutionally and controlled by bureaucracy. The state openly enters maternal life and decides who is a good mother and corrective disciplinary actions against those who do not conform. This regulation shows how the maternal care is integrated into the systems of political governance and social management.

Normalization is one more significant notion which can be applied to this analysis. Foucaultian theory holds that the contemporary systems of disciplines provide norms of behavior that are compared to people and assessed and rectified. Individuals who do not conform to the standards of the institutions are labeled inadequate or threatening and are the target of intervention. Motherhood in the novel by Chan is turned into a standardized social act that is controlled by strict institutional standards. The motherly affection, patience, emotional responsiveness and care giving practices are constantly evaluated based on officially valid parenting models. This is done by turning motherhood into a quantifiable behavioral category and at the same time eliminating emotional complexity and subjectivity. The novel is thus a critical reflection of how institutional discourse creates idealized maternal norms which are impossible and psychologically devastating(Foucault, 1977).

Besides Foucauldian theory, this paper also uses feminist theories of institutional motherhood especially the writings of Adrienne Rich (1976) and Sharon Hays (1996). Rich differentiates motherhood as a personal relationship and motherhood as a patriarchal institution that is aimed at controlling social roles of women and their emotional labor. Institutional motherhood gives women very restrictive expectations as it establishes the definition of maternal identity based on the cultural ideals of sacrifice, perfection and unconditional care. Likewise, the idea of intensive mothering proposed by Hays, describes the way modern societies impose too much emotional, psychological and physical devotion on mothers and assigns the role of taking care of their children to mothers individually. Such feminist views can shed some light on the way maternal identity in the

novel of Chan is organized around unattainable norms of emotional acting and institutional responsibility.

The notion of emotional governance also supports the analytical paradigm of this paper. The idea of emotional governance is the control of emotions, attachments and affective behaviors via disciplinary practices and the institution of expectations. The motherly love in *The School of Good Mothers* is subject to being observed, judged and reprimanded. The expression of emotions is converted into a performative demand in the course of which mothers are obliged to exhibit care on an unceasing basis following state-approved criteria. This form of governance demonstrates how surveillance is spread beyond physical behavior to emotional life and leads to anxiety, guilt and self policing among the characters of the novel. The control of affection thus becomes a major process of institutional power in the story. This paper combines Foucauldian theory of surveillance, biopolitics, normalization and feminist theories of institutional motherhood to view *The School for Good Mothers* as a dystopic critique of modern emotional and maternal governmental systems. The theoretical framework explains that the institutional control in the novel is not solely based on external punishment but also on psychological discipline and affective regulation. This model is the analytical basis of the discussion of the way in which maternal love is transformed into a surveillance object, a bureaucratic object and state power in the course of the novel.

2.1. Maternal Surveillance and the Panoptic State in *The School for Good Mother*

In *The School for Good Mothers*, Chan represents motherhood as a state of constant surveillance where maternal conduct, emotionality and caregiving practices are put under the institutionalized scrutiny and disciplinary measures. The type of dystopian society, which the novel displays, is based on the idea of panopticism introduced by Foucault, whereby the authority is exercised through constant surveillance and the internalization of the surveillance process instead of through the physical coercion alone (Foucault, 1977). In the story, mothers live in the fear that they will be judged and this situation makes fear, anxiety and self-observation to be the hallmarks of motherhood. “Cameras will be installed in every room, Frida learns, except the bathroom.” (Chan, 2022, p. 21). Surveillance thus goes beyond institutional control and goes deeper to the psychological aspect of being embedded in the minds of the mothers themselves. This image of motherhood by Chan brings forth the ways in which modern systems of governance govern intimate human relations through making the care of the individual an act where the individual is responsible to the public.

The School of Good Mothers is an institution in the form of a disciplinary apparatus that is meant to normalize the motherly behavior based on strict ideological norms. Mothers are ceaselessly surveyed in terms of monitored interactions, behavioral tests and emotional tests that are aimed at identifying the fitness of mothers to bear children. These

mechanisms are indicative of Foucauldian disciplinary formations whereby observation is not only a means of determining deviance but a means of construction of conformity by repetition of correction and normalization. The institution does not merely penalize mothers who fail to do so, but rather, it becomes actively involved in re-building a maternal identity by forcing women to internalize state-approved definitions of care, patience and emotional responsibility. Consequently, motherhood is alienated to individual emotional experience and changed into a performative category that is controlled by bureaucratic expectations(Foucault, 1977).

The experiences of Frida Liu in the institution depict psychological impacts of panoptic surveillance. With time, her maternal behavior is influenced by the fear of being judged by the institution and the fear of losing her daughter forever. This anxiety creates a kind of self-observation whereby Frida controls her movements, responses and methods of care giving to the expectations of the state. Foucault claims that disciplinary power works best when people get internalized to the institution of observation and make themselves regulators (Foucault, 1977). This process is reflected in the narrative by Chan, which shows mothers who start policing themselves despite the fact that they are not supervised directly. Surveillance is thus not necessarily external but also internal redefining maternal subjectivity with anxiety, anticipation and emotional self-discipline.

Notably, surveillance, in the novel, goes beyond the physical act of behavior to emotional and psychological aspects of the maternal life. “When they have enough material, they say, they’ll use the footage to analyze her feelings.” (Chan, 2022, p. 21). The mothers are not only supposed to engage in proper care giving practices but also to exhibit institutionally accepted types of affection, patience and emotional composure. The love itself is quantifiable and can be perceived on the disciplinary level of the institution. Emotional intimacy is thus reduced into a controlled social acting which is measured by bureaucratic norms as opposed to genuine human attachment. This control of love speaks of how much surveillance infiltrates intimate emotional existence, eliminating the separations between individual experience and civic responsibility. Chan is critical of the modern culture of surveillance by showing how surveillance mechanisms are becoming more and more dominant over the expression of emotions in the name of protection, responsibility and social wellbeing(Foucault, 1978).

The unequal relations of power between the state and mothers are further supported by the panoptic structure of the institution. The government has the means to establish normative maternal behavior and at the same time dictate the impacts of perceived failure. Mothers do not have a choice to decide how to take care of their children since their identities will be conditional upon the external criticism and bureaucratic acceptance. This asymmetry can be seen as a manifestation of larger biopolitical structures whereby governments control the personal life via ideological criterion within the realms of care,

morality and social responsibility. In such a dynamic, Chan reveals how motherhood is exposed to institutional intervention in a society that is gradually being dominated by surveillance and disciplinary control (Foucault, 1977).

Furthermore, it is evident in the novel that uncertainty and anticipation are the most oppressive means of surveillance. Mothers are hardly aware of when they are being monitored or how their actions will be deciphered by institutional forces. This uncertainty heightens the psychological strain and forces one to constantly regulate himself or herself. According to Chan, in order to make surveillance most efficient, people have to internalize the disciplinary expectations to the extent that they can be implemented almost without external pressure. Motherhood in the novel in this sense is a condition organized along the lines of anxiety, performance and incessant emotional surveillance within authoritarian regimes of governance.

2.2. Institutionalizing the Good Mother

Besides maternal surveillance, *The School for Good Mothers* is also critical of institutionalizing ideal motherhood based on systems of normalization, behavior conditioning and ideological discipline. The novel does not depict motherhood as a personal emotional experience but as some sort of social standard and an institutionalized rigid set of expectations. The School of Good Mothers is a bureaucratic apparatus which is aimed at producing socially acceptable maternal subjects based on the state-determined models of care and responsibility. It is in this way that maternal identity is lost in relation to emotional authenticity and is reconstituted as a quantifiable action controlled by institutional power (Chan, 2022).

The idea of the good mother in the institution is what Foucault (1977) refers to as normalization whereby institutions determine behavioral standards and assess individuals based on their adherence to these standards. In the novel, mothers are evaluated based on the idealized demands of patience, attentiveness, emotional endurance and self-sacrifice. “A higher pitch. Higher daily word count. Frida needs to relax. Her temperature and heart rate suggest an unsustainable level of stress.” (Chan, 2022, p. 117). These norms are introduced as objective markers of maternal competence irrespective of their highly ideological and socially constructed character. Those mothers who do not live up to these expectations are left to be considered deficient and placed under corrective intervention. As a result, good motherhood ideology serves as a power tool that justifies surveillance and at the same time pathologizes imperfection, exhaustion and vulnerability of emotions.

Chan also presents the mechanism of institutional motherhood based on conditioning of behavioral repetition to eradicate the nonconformity to the approved forms of motherhood behavior. “The mothers must narrate everything, impart wisdom, give their undivided attention, maintain eye contact at all times.” (Chan, 2022, p. 107). The mothers undergo controlled physical activities, role-played parenting activities and emotional

training programs meant to redefine their care giving behaviors in line with the institutional ideals. These disciplinary practices make motherhood more of an act in which obedience is valued more than real emotional bonding. The fact that Adrienne Rich draws a distinction between motherhood as individual and motherhood as institution that is patriarchal takes on special significance in this context (Rich, 1976). The novel shows that institutional structures steal maternal identity by establishing permissible ways of loving as well as obliterating individuality, emotional conflict and subjectivity.

The disciplinary logics of the institution are also indicative of the larger neoliberal parenting ideologies which make the mother accountable individually on all the emotional and developmental future of her children. Sharon Hays (1996) presents her argument that the culture of intensive mothering requires women to work too hard with their emotions, sacrifice themselves and be on guard all the time and at the same time blame them as the causes of the social conditions they cannot do anything about. Chan heightens these cultural pressures with the dystopian exaggeration of presenting a society where maternal fault is a reason to be punished or even intervened by the state. The novel is actually critical of not just authoritarian government, but also modern day parenting cultures where maternal self-observation and unrealistic ideals of perfection are accepted as normal.

Notably, it is the eradication of maternal identity that enables the institutionalization of motherhood in the novel. The mothers are supposed to fit in the consistent behavioral patterns no matter their economic background, emotional situation or mental conflicts. The experiences of Frida as a working single mother are not empathised with in the institutional system since the system is more concerned with standard performance and not the human complexity. Women identity is thereby diminished to bureaucratic terms and quantifiable actions instead of being comprehended as a dynamic and emotionally sensitive human relationship. Chan complains about this simplification by demonstrating the dehumanization of motherhood by institutional governance, which is bureaucratically categorized and inflexibly ideological(Chan, 2022).

The novel also focuses on the inability of reaching the ideals of maternity in institutions. The expectations that are brought to the mothers remain psychologically impossible to achieve and thus the maternal identity is always being formed based on fear, guilt and anxiety. Even such moments as affection are evaluated, mothers have to constantly doubt the sufficiency of their emotional reactions. This process supports the self-renewed character of the disciplinary power since mothers internalize the expectations of the institution and control themselves based on unattainable ideals. Chan thus unveils as the institutional motherhood generates emotional burnout and psychological self-sustenance instead of emotional safety or meaningful care(Foucault, 1977)

2.3. Emotional Regulation and Controlled Affection

The emotional governance, whereby the maternal affection is controlled, is one of the most distressing parts of *The School for Good Mothers*. The novel illustrates that institutional power is not only to regulate physical behavior but affect emotional expression, attachment and intimacy itself. The maternal love is converted into a quantifiable social act that can be judged by the means of bureaucratic criteria and disciplinary monitoring. “It doesn’t matter that love can’t break a fever, that love can’t be measured. Anything can be measured. They have the tools now.” (Chan, 2022, p. 156). In this representation, Chan reveals how modern forms of governance are more and more controlling of emotional life by establishing what is acceptable ways of caring, affection and interpersonal behavior.

Emotional expression is subject to constant observation and evaluation within the institution based on the approved models of maternal behavior by the state. Mothers are supposed to be patient, warm, attentive and emotionally stable despite their mental anguish or circumstantial conditions. Love is rendered performative since emotional truth is sacrificed to the institutional judgment. Mothers are no longer able to show their love, they only show their affection in a strategic way to expect being watched and judged. This redefinition of care as performance is indicative of more general processes of emotional regulation whereby institutions are not only controlling behavior, but also emotions themselves (Rose, 1999; Lupton, 2011).

The control of affection has great psychological impact among the mothers in the novel. This constant monitoring causes anxiety, emotional burnout and self-consciousness and forces mothers to examine their own emotional reactions at all times. The instability of the maternal feeling is revealed when Frida becomes more and more unconfident about the adequacy of her maternal feelings due to the fact that the institutional authority establishes a definition of what should be considered as acceptable emotional behavior based on strict disciplinary norms. This kind of uncertainty demonstrates what is referred to as psychological governance by Nikolas Rose (1999) as a type of power, which makes individuals internalize the expectations of the institution and govern themselves emotionally. The story told by Chan shows the effect of emotional surveillance that disrupts the sense of self by turning personal sentiments into something bureaucratically assessed.

Notably, the novel is a criticism of the ideological belief that maternal affection could be measured objectively or could be institutionalized. The institution identifies affection as a measure of competence and diminishes emotional connections to observable actions and evaluative standards. This bureaucratic reasoning simply disregards the complicated nature of the maternal experience by supposing that good motherhood is knowable by the institutional judgment. Chan reveals the violence that is involved in this

reduction by showing how emotional intimacy is reduced to administrative control and disciplinary classification(Chan, 2022).

Gender expectations towards emotional labor and care giving are also supported by the regulation of affection in the novel. Mothers have to be emotionally steady and always devoted no matter how tired, frustrated or psychologically distressed they feel. These expectations are based on the patriarchal ideologies, which make women responsible of providing emotional care as matters of course and depriving them of the material and emotional challenges of motherhood. Chan criticizes these presuppositions by making the maternal emotional labor a place of exploitation by the institution and a place of psychological disciplining(Hochschild, 1983; Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

In addition, emotional governance is a social conformity in the novel. Mothers who do not exhibit institutionally acceptable emotions are classified as dangerous, unstable or morally deficient. Emotional deviation thus is a pretext to disciplinary action and social ostracism. In this process, the institution creates emotional norms which govern the behavior of the mother and the subjectivity of motherhood. Chan discloses how emotional regimes generate obedient subjects through forcing them to conform their emotions to the expectations of the institutions.

2.4. Biopolitical Control, Maternal Anxiety and Structural Power

In addition to the personal surveillance and emotional control, *The School for Good Mothers* introduces motherhood as a biopolitical category that is controlled by institutional mechanisms that govern reproduction, caregiving and family relations. The idea of biopolitics by Foucault describes how contemporary states are able to utilize power to regulate bodies, population and daily living by creating disciplinary institutions and normative standards (Foucault, 1978). Motherhood identity in the novel by Chan appears to be the object of biopolitical interference since the state takes the control to decide who can be a good parent and which type of care giving is socially acceptable(Chan, 2022).

The control the institution exerts over motherhood is indicative of the growth of state control into the personal aspects of life. Parenting is no longer seen as a family duty but it has become a subject of regulation which needs institutional control and correction. This intervention reveals the nature of biopolitical systems whereby it establishes acceptable patterns of social conduct and when it punishes individuals who do not conform to the anticipated social patterns. Mothers are turned into subjective entities who are governed and controlled and whose emotionality, parenting and family relations are integrated into larger structures of bureaucratic control(Foucault, 1978).

Another way through which biopolitical control brings out chronic maternal anxiety and psychological insecurity is also depicted in the novel. “If Lucretia hadn’t looked away, she would have noticed that Gabby wasn’t moving. If Lucretia hadn’t looked away, Gabby could have been saved.” (Chan, 2022, p. 147). Mothers live in the state of

perpetual fear of being judged, punished and deprived of their children, which builds the environment of fear and emotional instability. This anxiety turns into a rule of government since it makes mothers internalize the expectations of the institution and control themselves and their own. Chan insinuates that state power works best when people discipline themselves willingly by the fear of failure and ostracizing.

Moreover, biopolitical governance in the novel skews against social vulnerable women, especially those who are single mothers and those who are economically or emotionally unstable. Through her experiences, Frida illustrates how the institutions do not take into account the structural inequalities and at the same time blame mothers individually as the creators of the situation that is influenced by the general social conditions of the society. The novel thus criticizes the neoliberal individualism, gender responsibility and surveillance intersection by revealing how the institutional power pathologizes maternal imperfection and disregards the systemic inequalities (Foucault, 1977).

Finally, *The School for Good Mothers* depicts biopolitical governance as the system that turns motherhood into the area of institutional control, emotional regulation and discipline. The dystopian story written by Chan is a criticism of the modern societies where the surveillance is becoming more of an intrusion into the realm of intimate emotional life under the banner of protection, accountability and social welfare. The novel reveals the psychological violence inherent in the systems that attempt to control love, care and human intimacy by enforcing bureaucratic power through its portrayal of maternal surveillance, normalization, emotional governance and biopolitical discipline.

3. Conclusion

The School for Good Mothers by Jessamine Chan is a critique of the modern culture of surveillance by presenting motherhood as a state which is controlled by governmental surveillance, emotional control and biopolitical control via institutional surveillance. The novel shows how motherly love is turned into a quantifiable social act that can be disciplined and judged through bureaucracy and discipline, showing how far state power has infiltrated personal emotional life. By institutionalizing the image of the good mother, Chan reveals the ways in which surveillance systems promote the normalization of impossible norms of caregiving and generate anxiety, guilt and self-regulation in mothers. Applying the Foucauldian theories of surveillance and feminist theories of institutional motherhood, this paper contends that the novel portrays the maternal identity as the location of ideological discipline that is made through the means of normalization, emotional regulation and state intervention. Finally, the novel cautions against modern systems that turn care, intimacy and maternal love into processes of institutional control and surveillance of obedience.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Andrejevic, M. (2007). *iSpy: Surveillance and power in the interactive era*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Atwood, M. (1985). *The handmaid's tale*. Toronto, Canada: McClelland and Stewart.
- Baccolini, R., & Moylan, T. (Eds.). (2003). *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books.
- Chan, J. (2022). *The school for good mothers*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October*, 59, 3–7.
- Douglas, S. J., & Michaels, M. W. (2004). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Esposito, R. (2008). *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy* (T. Campbell, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Faircloth, C. (2014). *Intensive parenting and the expansion of parenting*. In E. Lee, J. Bristow, C. Faircloth, & J. Macvarish (Eds.), *Parenting culture studies* (pp. 25–50). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Gandy, O. H., Jr. (1993). *The panoptic sort: A political economy of personal information*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Glenn, E. N. (1994). Social constructions of mothering: A thematic overview. In E. N. Glenn, G. Chang, & L. R. Forcey (Eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience and agency* (pp. 1–29). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lee, E., Bristow, J., Faircloth, C., & Macvarish, J. (2014). *Parenting culture studies*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Lupton, D. (2011). *The politics of medicine: Surveillance, life-style and health*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Lyon, D. (2007). *Surveillance studies: An overview*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- O'Reilly, A. (2016). *Matricentric feminism: Theory, activism and practice*. Toronto, Canada: Demeter Press.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self* (2nd ed.). London, England: Free Association Books.