

Constructing the good mother: Patriarchal control in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers***Sandy Tahniah¹✉, Rini Susanti Wulandari²**^{1,2}Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 30 June 2025 Approved 05 July 2025 Published 31 July 2025 Keywords: Institutional Motherhood, Maternal Subjectivity, Radical Feminism, State Patriarchy	This research is driven by the need to see motherhood as a social construct shaped by patriarchal norms—often tied to women and loaded with unrealistic expectations—while feminist perspectives push back, pointing to how the state plays a key role in controlling and judging mothers. Jessamine Chan's novel <i>The School for Good Mothers</i> has been analyzed from various perspectives, but it has rarely been studied explicitly through Adrienne Rich's concept of institutional motherhood. This study aims to analyze how the state shapes, supervises, and punishes motherhood through visible institutions, such as mentorship, and its impact on agency, identity, and mother-child relations, focusing on the main character, Frida Liu. This study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach, utilizing content analysis through close reading. Data were categorized into three domains of patriarchal control: surveillance, evaluation and punishment, and ideal motherhood standards. Results show Frida experiences four forms of oppression: state control, inner conflict, identity erasure, and emotional disconnection. This study offers insight into feminist literary criticism by demonstrating that motherhood in fiction can be employed as a tool of patriarchal control while reminding us of the importance of viewing mothers as whole human beings in social policy and cultural representation.

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INTRODUCTION

In many societies, motherhood is assumed to be a biological and natural phenomenon based on the belief that women are inherently connected to the role of motherhood through their bodies and reproductive capacities (Henriksson et al., 2020). This view is shaped and strengthened by cultural values that place women as the primary caregivers in the family. As a result, there is a high standard of motherhood. A “good mother” is expected to nurture, love, protect, educate, instill moral values, and devote her life entirely to her children (Heward-Belle, 2017, as cited in Stewart, 2021). However, feminist views reject

this notion and argue that motherhood is a social construct shaped by social norms and patriarchal controls, influenced by changing expectations in society, and supported or challenged by laws and dominant ideas (Biswas, 2022; Boyd, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2023). These not only limit the view of motherhood but also expand societal expectations of women. Understanding these constructions is important because it exposes how patriarchal and state institutions work together to define, monitor, and control maternal behavior.

Patriarchy is a form of male domination in both public and private spheres, conceptualized by feminists to explain power relations and the subordinate status of women and employed as an

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analytical tool to understand women's lived realities (Johri, 2023; Sultana, 2012). This system is not limited to gender relations alone but also operates through larger social structures and institutions, such as the state. In the context of motherhood, the state plays a role in shaping and regulating maternal standards through public policies, laws, and social evaluation systems (Boyd, 2013). Consequently, women's bodies, behaviors, and maternal identities are monitored and judged based on gender bias and narrow maternal standards. This kind of state interference further demonstrates that motherhood is no longer a private matter based solely on biological ties and emotional bonds but has become an ideological and institutional construct shaped by public policies and legal interventions (Hennum & Aamodt, 2023). When the state, which is supposed to be neutral and supportive of motherhood, takes an active role in creating and enforcing maternal norms through institutional power, women lose their autonomy over their role as mothers. They become vulnerable to social surveillance and punishment for mistakes and deviations from ideal roles and predetermined norms.

The patriarchal system that strengthens the standards of motherhood through the institution of the state magnifies the real impact on the lives of women, especially mothers. Under these conditions, the role of mothers turns into a tool of social control that perpetuates male domination, obstructs gender equality, and limits women's autonomy (Shah et al., 2020). In legal systems and social policies, women can even lose custody of their children if they are deemed not to meet the prevailing standards of motherhood. As an example, reports from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), each year in the United States, over 200,000 children are placed into the foster care system. Most of these cases are due to neglect that is rooted in poverty, not abuse (American Civil Liberties Union; Human Rights Watch, 2023). This fact shows that existing standards of motherhood can deprive children of custody simply for economic reasons. The pressure of the norm to always be the "perfect mother" creates a heavy mental burden. Despite fulfilling their maternal responsibilities, many women still experience a sense of failure due to unattainable ideal standards (Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2022; Meeussen & VanLaar, 2018), as well as feeling "never enough" and psychologically burnt out (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Representations of the role of motherhood shaped by social construction do not only occur in social reality. However, they are also found in literary works that serve as reflections and critiques of the social order.

One contemporary novel that highlights the social construction of motherhood is *The School for Good Mothers* (2023). The novel tells the story of an Asian-American single mother who must undergo training to become a "good mother" at a designated school because she is deemed a failure in her role. Jessamine Chan's dystopian novel depicts a world which the state actively intervenes in parenting, particularly targeting mothers. As a debut novel by a Chinese-American writer, it draws from both speculative fiction and contemporary social issues, especially the pressures faced by marginalized mothers in the U.S. context. This makes it highly relevant for examining how motherhood operates as a tool of patriarchal control.

This study examines how motherhood is institutionally constructed in the novel *The School for Good Mothers*, utilizing Adrienne Rich's radical feminist theory, particularly the concept of motherhood as an institution. Previous studies related to this novel also employ various feminist perspectives, demonstrating that the issue of motherhood in Chan's work has garnered the attention of researchers from diverse theoretical approaches. These studies generally highlighted the pressure on mothers through social surveillance, emotional demands, and normative expectations imposed on the role of motherhood. Andrea O'Reilly, in her essay, examines how the novel employs dystopian satire to critique and dismantle the norms of motherhood regulated by state policy. Additionally, the essay explores forms of resistance to normative motherhood through emotional awareness, emphasizing the importance of authenticity in motherhood (O'Reilly, 2024). Roberta Garrett, on the other hand, focuses on critiquing neoliberal culture and class and race-biased maternal standards, highlighting how the oppression experienced by mothers is also influenced by social and economic structures (Garrett, 2025). Finally, Rylee Igel compares this novel to imperial motherhood, which strongly influenced ideas about motherhood in the 19th century (Igel, 2024).

Although the three previous studies have discussed *The School for Good Mothers* from a feminist perspective, there is still a gap in explicit analysis highlighting how the state, as an instrument of patriarchy, shapes and controls motherhood through policy and technology. This study attempts to fill this gap by using radical feminist theory to discuss how patriarchy, through state intervention, controls, monitors, and punishes women by constructing ideal standards of motherhood. It also aims to analyze how such patriarchal control affects women emotionally, morally, and behaviorally. Thus, this article contributes new insights to the literature on maternal dystopia by emphasizing the social and

cultural processes of patriarchy as the center of the construction of the “good mother” in society.

METHODS

This study utilizes a descriptive, qualitative methodology with a close reading approach to analyze the novel *The School for Good Mothers* by Jessamine Chan. This method was chosen because it is well-suited for exploring the meaning and narrative structure in literary works, particularly in identifying the forms of oppression experienced by female characters. Close reading is a technique for analyzing literature that entails a meticulous and repetitive examination of the text, with attention to formal elements such as diction, syntax, tone, and imagery, to explore implicit meanings and complex narrative structures (Duarte et al., 2019). It also functions as a politico-literary practice capable of uncovering hidden ideologies and power in texts (Khaghaninejad, 2015), a practice particularly relevant to this study, as the novel presents social criticism through the representation of motherhood.

This research examines the construction of motherhood as a social institution controlled by the state within a patriarchal system, as depicted in the novel *The School for Good Mothers*. The analysis focuses on how mothers, particularly the main character, and the institutional mechanisms in the novel shape the image of a “good mother” and its impact on mothers. This research utilizes Adrienne Rich’s radical feminist theory, as presented in *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1978), particularly the distinction between motherhood as an individual experience and as a social institution. This approach is used to examine how the state shapes and controls motherhood as an institution, as well as the impact on individual mothers through social surveillance and punishment for those who deviate from ideal motherhood norms.

The primary data sources in this study are quotations, dialogues, and descriptions of events in the novel that show the dynamics of power relations between the state and mothers. The analysis process was conducted by interpreting the data employing the framework of radical feminism to formulate conclusions regarding the

forms of oppression of women through the institution of motherhood.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motherhood as an Institution: Patriarchal Control through the State

The novel *The School for Good Mothers* begins with every mother's nightmare. Frida Liu, a single mother, discovers that her daughter, Harriet, has been taken into custody by the authorities. “You left your baby at home. Alone. Your neighbors heard her crying.” (Chan, 2023, p.3). Frida was accused of neglecting her daughter by leaving her home alone for two hours.

The patriarchal control over women, especially mothers, in this novel, is displayed through social surveillance and judgment mechanisms that are reinforced by state intervention. Frida's contextually debatable actions are immediately considered a grave and unforgivable mistake. Society leaves no room for the complexity of the maternal experience, and the state acts as an apparatus enforcing idealized maternal standards.

Frida was required to undergo a series of trials that ultimately still found her to be a failed mother. Frida's parental rights were revoked, and she was required to attend a rigorous educational program established by the state for 1 year in order to regain custody of her child. This program represents a form of institutionalization of motherhood, regulated by the state under the pretext of promoting the moral and emotional well-being of mothers. The state creates schools that systematically discipline mothers to conform to certain social norms and standards of motherhood.

“There will be nine units of study, each composed of a set of lessons. ... Each unit will conclude with an evaluation day, and scores from those days will determine the mothers’ success.” (Chan, 2023, p.106-107).

Through nine learning units, the school requires mothers to follow a rigid curriculum on childcare and discipline. Each learning unit is monitored and ends with an evaluation that determines whether a mother meets the expected standards. The process confirms that motherhood is not considered something that is inherent to the experience of motherhood but rather a

competition that can be measured, tested, and assessed. This reflects Adrienne Rich's concept of motherhood as an institution that is ideologized and politicized, thus removing the personal and emotional dimensions of the practice of motherhood itself.

State Surveillance and Control Conducted by the State

Even before Frida was officially sent to school, state surveillance of her had already begun. After being accused of abandoning her child, Child Protection Services (CPS) installed surveillance cameras throughout Frida's home, except for the bathroom. The aim was to assess whether Frida was still fit to carry out the role of motherhood, including monitoring her emotional expressions after losing custody.

"'Ma'am, we need to set up some cameras.' Cameras will be installed in every room, Frida learns, except the bathroom." (Chan, 2023, p.21)

This action shows the total surveillance of the mother's body and behavior by the state institution. Frida not only loses her autonomy as a mother but also her privacy as an individual. This surveillance reflects Adrienne Rich's belief that, in a patriarchal society, the institution of motherhood serves as a control mechanism to guarantee that women continue to play the roles that have been given to them rather than as a source of support.

In *The School for Good Mothers*, the state serves as both an institution that reinterprets the role of motherhood through a strict and uncompromising surveillance system and an enforcer of the mother's wrongdoing. Surveillance affects a mother's mental and emotional health in addition to her physical health. This illustrates how the state has assumed the role of motherhood and transformed it into a political and social endeavor.

One of the extreme forms of surveillance depicted is through sophisticated child surrogate robot dolls. Each doll has a camera inside to not only record the mother's activities but also collect emotional data, such as heart rate, facial expressions, and even eye blink patterns, to detect stress and "insincerity" of affection.

"There's a camera inside each doll. 'You can see her, and she can see you,' Ms.

Russo explains. In addition to their role as proxy children, the dolls will collect data. They'll gauge the mothers' love. The mothers' heart rates will be monitored to judge anger. Their blinking patterns and expressions will be monitored to detect stress, fear, ingratitude, deception, boredom, ambivalence, and a host of other feelings." (Chan, 2023, p.106).

This oversight shows that the state not only standardizes maternal behavior but also formalizes maternal emotions as something that can be assessed objectively and quantitatively. In reality, human love cannot be measured and analyzed using systems or technology. Love, which should be the most profound and most personal expression of a mother, is reduced to a biological indicator that must meet specific standards. This emphasizes the dehumanization that the institution inflicts on mothers who must love a surrogate doll as if it were their child. Moreover, in Adrienne Rich's view, this condition reflects the transformation of motherhood from experience (motherhood as experience) to an institution (motherhood as an institution), where the state and patriarchal system control how women should feel and show affection towards children.

Furthermore, state control also shows a very real gender bias in the way mothers and fathers are treated. In the novel, there is a difference in experience between mothers and fathers who fail to undergo the learning process. While mothers like Frida are often subjected to a thorough moral and emotional punishment, fathers are given a more lenient and forgiving narrative.

"'Do we have to talk about that? I am a father learning to be a better man.'

'Seriously? That's what they have you say? We have to say 'I am a narcissist. I am a danger to my child.' Does that mean you're getting him back?'

'If I don't blow it. My counselor said my chances are fair. What about you?'

'Fair to poor.'" (Chan, 2023, p.237).

In the conversation between Frida and Tucker (one of the failed fathers), it is clear that mothers are often forced to blame themselves as if they are always wrong. They are constantly judging themselves by strict standards, to the point of feeling like they are not good enough and failing as women. In contrast, fathers were able to

remain neutral, given a second chance, and perceived as trying without the pressure of harsh judgment. Furthermore, mothers are not even sure they will be able to get custody of their children back after a year of rigorous training because they always get bad grades. At the same time, fathers can be confident of regaining custody if they avoid making any mistakes.

In line with Rich's theory, this reflects a patriarchal construction that places women as the main subject in the institution of motherhood as well as the main object in the surveillance system. Thus, through surveillance technology and assessment systems that target women's bodies and souls, the state has established a rigid and repressive institution of motherhood. Motherhood is no longer an autonomous and personal space but a public area that is ideologically controlled by the state and patriarchal society.

This finding is also aligned with Boyd (2013) view that state involvement in parenting often reinforces patriarchal standards of motherhood in the name of child protection. In this novel, the surveillance technology employed reflects what Hennum & Aamodt (2023) suggest—that even democratic states are now increasingly normalizing the monitoring of parents, especially mothers. The story in this novel presents an extreme version of this reality, while also reflecting feminist concerns about the limits of state involvement in mothers' lives.

Evaluation and Punishment: The Patriarchal Judge

In *The School for Good Mothers*, the state acts as a judge, assessing, punishing, and determining the fate of mothers. Through an evaluation mechanism, Frida and other mothers are asked to “play” the role of motherhood in front of instructors. This moment is not just a test but a stage for moral judgment that creates tension, anxiety, and a profound fear of failure.

"Evaluation day arrives. Each pair will take a turn in the center. The instructors will evaluate the combination of hugs, kisses, and affirmations." (Chan, 2023, p.142).

As is the case in society, the role of motherhood will never escape the scrutiny and judgment of the surrounding community. The above quote describes an evaluation day that serves as a moment of determination. Mothers are asked to demonstrate a particular form of

affection in front of instructors as if love can be measured by the number of hugs and the tone of praise. The state not only dictates how mothers should act but also how they should feel and express themselves. Within Adrienne Rich's framework of thought, this represents an extreme form of the institutionalization of motherhood: feelings that should be natural, complex, and personal are turned into moral standards that must be publicly displayed without flaw.

In addition to evaluations, mothers under constant surveillance face punishment if they fail to behave appropriately or conform to prevailing norms. Punishments range from cleaning duties, writing repentance journals, and participating in talk circles to the revocation of phone privileges with their children.

"It is February, and she hasn't seen Harriet in over three months. Her phone privileges have been revoked, punishment for failing the second care-and-nurture test. After the disastrous evaluation day, Frida begins spending more time with Meryl and Beth. All three have lost phone privileges." (Chan, 2023, p.173).

This punishment can also be thought of as the separation of mothers from their biological children and isolation from the outside world. This kind of punishment is the primary weapon of patriarchal judges who manipulate the maternal bond. Institutions harness the power of love between mother and child to torture mothers and use it as a tool of control. If mothers fail to do the training, phone privileges are revoked, as well as if mothers fail to meet the standards of motherhood set by the state. The threat and realization of disconnection from the child is a punishment that psychologically enforces compliance from mothers. This, of course, makes mothers even more dependent and vulnerable to patriarchal control, which reinforces Rich's argument that within the institution of patriarchal motherhood, guilt and fear are constantly instilled as tools of control. Thus, this example amply illustrates how mothers are always required to be perfect, asserting that failure to meet existing patriarchal standards is a grave sin that must be atoned for with suffering.

Even worse, these evaluations and punishments do not apply equally to everyone. Just as in the real world, there is a double standard for the care of mothers and fathers;

novel *The School for Mother* also illustrates this through the state's differential treatment of mothers' and fathers' schools.

"Tucker cheerfully answers her questions about the father's school: no cleaning crew, yes brain scans, counseling once a month, no talk circle, what's talk circle, some hand jobs, but no real romances, not that he knows of. A bunch of fistfights, but no expulsions. Some malfunctions, but no dead dolls. They get to call home for an hour every Sunday. No one has ever lost phone privileges. The counselors think it's important for them to stay in their children's lives. For the most part, it's been a supportive group." (Chan, 2023, p.235).

This quotation reasonably demonstrates the distinction between punishment and training for fathers and mothers. Fathers merely need to demonstrate good intentions; mothers are obliged to demonstrate their emotional perfection. In this role, the state actively promotes gender inequality and bias in parenting in addition to controlling and punishing women. This is strongly reflected in the system, which shows how the state discriminates against mothers in their role as parents. From Rich's perspective, this reflects how patriarchy places the entire burden of parenting on women while giving men more freedom in the construction of their fatherhood.

Through this unequal system of evaluation and punishment, the state acts as a "patriarchal judge" who determines who is worthy of being called a mother. Judgments are made based on rigid, dehumanizing, and gender-inequitable standards. The result is a process of control that robs mothers of their autonomy, oppresses them, and separates them from their children in the name of being a "good mother."

Frida's experience of being constantly judged and punished reinforces the findings of Batram-Zantvoort et al. (2022) that the pressure to be a perfect mother can lead to emotional exhaustion and guilt. In the novel, this evaluation is systematically packaged and institutionalized by the state, as if failing to be a mother is a moral crime. This expands on Rich's critique by showing that state institutions not only enforce norms but also manipulate mothers' feelings through fear and guilt.

The State's Ideal Mother: Enforced Norms

Mothers are often positioned as figures who are morally and socially responsible for the mistakes made by their children. Failure to educate children is considered a problem that has a significant impact on society. In the novel, this is reflected in how schools use statistical data to link "bad motherhood" with social problems committed by children and adolescents.

"Ms. Knight's diamond ring catches the light. She shows them charts that demonstrate the link between bad parenting and juvenile delinquency, bad parenting and school shooters, bad parenting and teen pregnancy, bad parenting and terrorism, not to mention high school and college graduation rates, not to mention expected earnings." (Chan, 2023, p.84).

This quote suggests that mothers are no longer viewed as unique individuals with limitations but rather as the center of all social solutions. The state believes that the crisis in society is rooted in the failure of mothers to fulfill their domestic roles. Women are made scapegoats for all social problems, and with that, the state justifies disciplining them. Thus, the state not only supervises and punishes but also creates the figure of the "ideal mother" through imposed normative narratives.

This is further emphasized symbolically in the sentence, "'Fix the home,' she says, 'and fix society.'" (Chan, 2023, p.84) which reinforces the idea that the task of saving the nation is placed entirely in the domestic space run by mothers. Moreover, through this quote, motherhood is seen as the foundation of social stability. Mothers are often regarded as agents of social change. The way they raise their children is considered to have a direct effect on the state of society at large. As a result, the burden borne by mothers is enormous; they are not only required to raise their children but also to maintain moral and social values within the community.

The image of the "ideal mother" is not only shaped through slogans but also explicitly taught in the school's nine-unit curriculum. Each unit teaches how to embody the state's version of motherhood: attentive, patient, expressive, skillful, and always prioritizing the child's needs. The first unit, for example, emphasizes the importance of a high tone of voice, loving gaze, and non-stop verbal narration throughout the day.

"The mothers must narrate everything,

impart wisdom, give their undivided attention, maintain eye contact at all times... The dolls have an off switch. You do not.” (Chan, 2023, p.111).

Here, mothers are not given the space to be natural or free in responding to their children but must always be in a programmed and idealized mode according to set standards. Mothers are always required to give their full attention and maintain a soft tone of voice as if they are a cheerful love machine full of imagination.

In other units, mothers are taught that the kitchen is the center of the home, which means play with children should be joyful and spontaneous and that mothers should be able to mediate emotional conflicts, manage anger, multitask, and be a person of moral and spiritual values. These standards are not only high but also total, making motherhood a task that knows no room for rest, error, or doubt.

“The kitchen is the center, and the mother the heart, of the home.” (Chan, 2023, p.176).

“During these final weeks, they’ll teach their dolls about altruism. Success depends on their own moral fitness, the bond between mother and doll, whether they’ve given the doll their values, whether these values are correct and good.” (Chan, 2023, p.292).

This idealization rejects the human nature of a mother. In Adrienne Rich's view, this construction represents the institutionalization of motherhood, requiring women to internalize social norms as a whole. The state and the patriarchal system take over the meaning of motherhood and set standards that all women must adhere to. These standards constantly haunt and pressure mothers to the point that they feel like failures if they are unable to achieve them.

In the context of the novel, the nine learning units reflect a form of internal control that Rich calls covert oppression-when the mother is no longer watched from the outside but actively monitors and judges herself in order to fulfill a norm that she did not create. This is further clarified by the state of the psychological burden associated with the idealized maternal norm: never quitting, never being satisfied, and never being wrong.

“A mother is a shark. You’re always moving. Always learning. Always trying to better yourself.” (Chan, 2023, p.137)

The phrase emphasizes that a good mother is never satisfied, always anxious, and continually striving for improvement. This is not a form of growth but rather a form of surveillance that has been internalized. The state no longer uses punishment to inflict permanent guilt and inadequacy on women. When mothers monitor and punish themselves for good, this is the best control. The patriarchal control that is deeply embedded in motherhood instills the value that motherhood is a task that is never finished and always related to perfection and achievement. through the institution of motherhood.

The view of the perfect mother in the nine-unit school curriculum reflects the findings of Schmidt et al. (2023), that standards of motherhood are now increasingly standardized and considered to be "neutrally" measurable. However, these standards are laden with gender bias that is detrimental to women. In the novel, this is depicted through a child's doll and an emotion-detecting device used to technically and rigidly assess a mother's love, yet, according to Adrienne Rich, such approaches strip the role of motherhood of its emotional and human significance.

The Impact of Patriarchal Control on Mothers

Alienation from Agency and Identity

The state not only forces mothers to conform to patriarchal standards but also forces them to change themselves from within. Under the state's surveillance system, mothers at *The School for Good Mothers* not only lose custody of their children but also slowly lose control over their bodies and identities. They are no longer seen as individuals with personal experience and moral capacity but rather as social projects that must be corrected according to predetermined standards.

“Bad parents must be transformed from the inside out... ‘Now, repeat after me: I am a bad mother, but I am learning to be good.’” (Chan, 2023, p.84-85).

The quote shows how the mothers in the novel experience a brainwashing that the institution systematically carries out as a form of patriarchal control. As a result, they lose the ability to understand and define themselves and are instead forced to accept the version of motherhood prescribed by the institution. This

process begins by erasing their values and replacing them with a new identity that the institution completely controls. Mothers are forced to recognize that they are "bad mothers" and that only through institutional training can they become "good." This process is a form of patriarchal control that undermines women's self-confidence and instills a sense of guilt that becomes the basis for long-term control over mothers. In Adrienne Rich's radical feminist framework, this is the most extreme form of the institutionalization of motherhood, where women are encouraged to doubt themselves and surrender their psychological autonomy to the patriarchal system.

This alienation does not only occur at the identity level but also the physical and existential levels. The tight control also shows how the state dehumanizes mothers so that their bodies are no longer wholly owned by themselves. She must continue to "function" as a mother, even when her condition does not allow it.

"No masks are provided for the mothers, who, even at their sickest, are not allowed to miss class... 'It's not like you can request sick days at home' Ms. Gibson says." (Chan, 2023, p.176).

In this excerpt, there is no room for illness, weakness, or bodily limitations. The mother's body is considered a tool that must always be productive as if motherhood is a mechanical job that must not be interrupted by the human condition. This reflects a form of bodily alienation that Rich also criticizes, where women's bodies are not treated as part of the self but as part of a social institution that ignores the personal experience and physical needs of mothers.

Through this process, Frida and other mothers experience a double alienation: separation from their identities as women and separation from their bodies as human beings. They become figures constructed entirely by the state, not based on love, experience, or emotional connection, but on external orders, judgments, and evaluations. In the logic of patriarchy, as Adrienne Rich has criticized, mothers no longer act out of love but out of moral obligation and social pressure that forces them to transform themselves into "good" in someone else's definition.

The process of alienation experienced by Frida can also be seen in line with the research of Hubert & Aujoulat (2018) who found that mothers can feel disconnected from themselves when parenting becomes an obligation without personal space. In this novel, institutional control causes mothers to lose control over their bodies and minds, supporting Rich's criticism that patriarchal maternal institutions deprive women of their identity and self-confidence.

Inner Conflict: Sacrificial Love vs. Personal Freedom

Frida not only loses control of her body and identity but is also caught in a severe inner conflict between her motherly love and her desire for personal freedom. The state, through its institutions, imposes a narrative that a mother's love must always be selfless and unselfish without making room for her desires or needs.

As if they are not allowed to have freedom and feelings, mothers cannot even have a bad day. In the novel, when Frida is overwhelmed as an individual and feels the need to break away from all that distresses her, it is considered an act of child neglect by the state.

"Tonight, again, Frida can't sleep. She needs to tell the family court judge that Harriet was not abused, was not neglected, that her mother just had one very bad day. She needs to ask the judge if he's ever had a bad day. On her bad day, she needed to get out of the house of her mind, trapped in the house of her body, trapped in the house where Harriet sat in her ExerSaucer with a dish of animal crackers." (Chan, 2023, p.14)

This quote captures a moment where Frida wants to acknowledge that she is not a bad mother, just a tired and overwhelmed human being. However, in the patriarchal system, as Adrienne Rich exposes, for mothers, there is no room to acknowledge that experience. The state does not recognize "one bad day"; it is because the role of the mother in this system is to give endlessly, even when she is broken inside.

Furthermore, women who have had children seem to have no other identity than mothers. This is portrayed to the extreme in the novel, where mothers cannot discuss anything other than motherhood.

"The mothers aren't supposed to celebrate their birthdays. They can only talk about themselves in relation to their children." (Chan, 2023, p.254).

The prohibition of celebrating birthdays, as mentioned in the quote above, amounts to the annihilation of individual identity. It emphasizes the elimination of the mother's existence as a human being with her desires, history, and identity. In line with Rich's thinking, this reflects the erasure of women's subjectivity, where women must erase personal needs in favor of motherhood. In addition, it exposes how the absurd system through school institutions expects mothers to love their children but is prohibited from loving and owning themselves, even on their birthdays. Frida hiding her birthday shows that she has accepted that her happiness is a disgrace, which shows the internalization of oppression.

As in the novel, mothers' freedom is further suppressed through patriarchal propaganda that loneliness is narcissism. When mothers are found to have romantic relationships, whether with other mothers, supervisors, or fathers, the state considers it a selfish act.

“‘but what I’m not understanding is why you’d put your selfish desires before your mothering.’ Loneliness is a form of narcissism. A mother who is in harmony with her child, who understands her place in her child’s life and her role in society, is never lonely. Through caring for her child, all her needs are fulfilled.” (Chan, 2023, p.210).

This narrative shows how personal desires are constructed as morally wrong. Mothers should not feel lonely and should not yearn for things beyond their children because it is considered a form of "narcissism." Here, maternal love is used as a tool to erase a woman's right to her own emotional experience.

It is used to legitimize the emotional exploitation of mothers, which Rich explains as the false idea that childcare can replace all human needs. However, mothers like Frida, for example, are lonely, yet she tries to deny it. Thus, this quote also proves that women as mothers will never be enough in patriarchal standards, where even the most basic needs, such as having friends, are considered selfish if they belong to mothers.

Frida's inner struggle between her love as a mother and her desire to remain true to herself reflects the findings of Meeussen & Van Laar (2018) that the constant demand to sacrifice oneself can erode a mother's identity and ambition. In the novel, Frida's desire for personal

space or forming relationships is portrayed as a form of selfishness. This shows that within the framework of patriarchal motherhood, there is no room for the diversity of emotions and needs of women, in line with Adrienne Rich's critique of a system that demands mothers to always prioritize their children over themselves.

Distrupted Mother-Child Bond: Discipline Over Connection

One of the most painful effects of patriarchal control in *The School for Good Mothers* is the loss of emotional connection between mother and child. Behind all the training, supervision, and evaluation, the system fails to maintain the one thing most fundamental to motherhood: the affective connection between a mother and her child.

“Phone privileges are nally granted.... In the background, Gust has been coaxing Harriet to say hello, reminding her that the woman on-screen is Mommy. He stands Harriet on his lap so Frida can see how tall she’s grown.” (Chan, 2023, p.257-258).

This quote shows that after months of confinement in training, Frida lost not only time with her child but also recognition from her child. Harriet did not recognize her mother's voice or face. This is not just a disconnection of communication but a disconnection of profound and existential emotional bonds.

In Adrienne Rich's view, mothering is an experience formed through emotional connection and daily interaction. When the state assumes this role and replaces it with a system of evaluation, testing, and surveillance, the mother-child relationship is no longer based on love and intimacy but on external assessment. The result is a distorted experience of motherhood, where closeness is replaced by performance, and warmth is replaced by distance.

A system that claims to "fix" motherhood creates permanent emotional damage for both mother and child. Frida's discipline and training did not strengthen her relationship with Harriet but rather slowly destroyed it. This shows that patriarchal control of motherhood not only targets women but also the most personal relationships in their lives.

O'Reilly (2024) explains that dystopian fiction often uses mother-child relationships to

criticize state involvement in personal matters. In this novel, the disconnect between Frida and Harriet illustrates that excessive surveillance can damage the most basic emotional bonds. This reinforces the feminist critique that state intervention, rather than protecting, can destroy closeness and intimacy in motherhood.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2023) represents how patriarchal institutions, through the state, create and normalize new forms of control over women - especially mothers - through institutional motherhood. Using Adrienne Rich's theory of radical feminism, it is found that the experience of motherhood in this novel is not simply a biological and emotional role but the result of a systematic formation marked by surveillance, evaluation, and punishment.

In the early stages, Frida Liu, as the main character, experiences the most explicit form of control in the form of state surveillance and a strict patriarchal evaluation system of motherhood. The state school she attends becomes the ultimate symbol of how motherhood is institutionalized, stripping away the personal, spontaneous, and human dimensions of motherhood. Frida and other mothers are taught to be idealized versions of "good mothers" according to state standards, with ways of talking, playing, caring, and even regulating emotions, all of which are monitored by technology and institutional moral norms.

Women's lives are directly affected by this system of oppression. Analysis shows that Frida feels disconnected from her identity and power as a woman because her maternal role is shaped by narratives that limit her freedom of thought, conversation, and even feeling. Her internal conflict deepens when she is forced to sacrifice her own needs for the sake of a "holy" and "unselfish" maternal role. It culminates when Frida's emotional connection with her child is systematically severed by the state, replaced with a disciplinary and artificial relationship through a smart doll-suggesting that emotional connection is trumped by compliance with the norm.

Thus, the findings of this study corroborate Rich's concept that motherhood as an institution is not born from women's authentic experiences but from ideological processes that reinforce the patriarchal order through the control of women's bodies and emotions. This research also offers a new reading of the novel *The School for Good Mothers*, which has not been widely analyzed with a radical feminist approach. In addition, this article opens a space to see motherhood in contemporary fiction as an ideological terrain, not just an affective relationship between mother and child.

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