

20. Judging Motherhood: AI, Surveillance, and Care in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* ¹

Özlem GÜMÜŞÇUBUK ²

APA: Gümüşçubuk, Ö. (2026). Judging Motherhood: AI, Surveillance, and Care in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (53), 352-364. **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22247132>

Abstract

This article examines Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) through the interconnected themes of artificial intelligence, surveillance, motherhood, gender inequality, and care. Set in a near-future dystopian society, the novel portrays a state-controlled system in which artificial intelligence continuously monitors, evaluates, and corrects maternal behavior. Focusing on the protagonist, Frida, the study analyzes how algorithmic surveillance transforms motherhood from a lived emotional experience into a measurable, performative role. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon and Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and as institution, the article suggests that surveillance technologies may reinforce patriarchal expectations and regulate women's reproductive and emotional labor. *The School for Good Mothers* functions as a disciplinary institution in which robotic surrogate children collect data on mothers' behaviors, emotions, and caregiving practices. Furthermore, the novel highlights significant gender inequalities by subjecting mothers to rigorous scrutiny while largely absolving fathers of comparable responsibility. The analysis also elucidates the extent to which care may be commodified and transformed into a monitored performance governed by institutional standards. This study argues that Chan's novel should be read not only as a portrayal of motherhood under tech-mediated patriarchy but also as a warning about how racialized and classed assumptions about "bad mothers" are encoded into algorithmic systems of governance. Ultimately, the novel explores how artificial intelligence and surveillance reshape maternal identity, autonomy, and human relationships within a technologically mediated patriarchal society.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, surveillance, motherhood, gender inequality, care

¹ **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Çıkar Çatışması: Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

Finansman: Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.

Telif Hakkı & Lisans: Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.

Kaynak: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Benzerlik Raporu: Alındı – Turnitin, Oran: % 7

Etik Şikayeti: editor@rumelide.com

Makale Türü: Araştırma makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 03.07.2026-**Kabul Tarihi:** 02.09.2026-**Yayın Tarihi:** 03.09.2026; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22247132>

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

² Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Ege Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Bölümü / Asist. Prof., Ege University, Faculty of Letters, Department of American Culture and Literature (İzmir, Türkiye), **e-posta:** ozlem.gumuscubuk@ege.edu.tr **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3214-9446> **ROR ID:** <https://ror.org/02eaafc18>

Anneliği Yargılamak: Jessamine Chan'ın *The School for Good Mothers* Romanında Yapay Zekâ, Gözetim ve Bakım ³

Öz

Bu makale, Jessamine Chan'ın *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) adlı romanını yapay zekâ, gözetim, annelik, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği ve bakım temaları çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Yakın gelecekte geçen distopik bir toplumda kurgulanan roman, annelik davranışlarının yapay zekâ teknolojileri aracılığıyla sürekli olarak izlendiği, değerlendirildiği ve düzeltildiği devlet kontrollü bir sistemi tasvir etmektedir. Bu makale, başkahraman Frida'nın deneyimlerine odaklanarak algoritmik gözetimin anneliği duygusal ve yaşanmış bir deneyim olmaktan çıkarıp onu ölçülebilir ve performatif bir role nasıl dönüştürdüğünü analiz etmektedir. Michel Foucault'nun Panoptikon kavramı ile Adrienne Rich'in anneliği deneyim ve kurum olarak ayıran yaklaşımından yararlanan makale, gözetim teknolojilerinin ataeril beklentileri nasıl güçlendirdiğini ve kadınların üreme ile duygusal emeklerini nasıl denetlediğini göstermektedir. Romandaki okul, annelerin davranışları, duyguları ve bakım pratikleri hakkında veri toplayan robot çocuklarla işleyen disiplinler bir kurum olarak sunulmaktadır. Ayrıca roman, anneleri yoğun bir denetime maruz bırakırken, babaları büyük ölçüde sorumluluktan muaf tutarak toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliklerini görünür kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Chan'ın romanının yalnızca teknoloji aracılığıyla işleyen ataerkillik altında anneliğin bir temsili olarak değil, aynı zamanda "kötü annelere" ilişkin ırksallaştırılmış ve sınıfsallaştırılmış varsayımların algoritmik yönetim sistemlerine nasıl kodlandığına dair bir uyarı olarak da okunması gerektiğini ileri sürmektedir. Sonuç olarak, roman yapay zekâ ve gözetimin teknolojik olarak yapılandırılmış ataeril bir toplumda annelik kimliğini, özerkliği ve insanlar arası ilişkileri nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğine ilişkin eleştirel bir inceleme sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yapay zekâ, gözetim, annelik, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği, bakım

³ **Statement (Thesis / Paper):** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Funding: No external funding was used to support this research.

Copyright & Licence: The authors own the copyright of their work published in the journal and their work is published under the CC BY-NC 4.0 licence.

Source: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography.

Similarity Report: Received – Turnitin /Ithenticate, Rate: 7 %

Ethics Complaint: editor@rumelide.com

Article Type: Research article, Article Registration Date: 03.07.2026-**Acceptance Date:** 02.09.2026-**Publication**

Date: 03.09.2026; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22247132>

Peer Review: Two External Referees / Double Blind

Introduction: Surveillance, AI, and the Dystopian Reorganization of Care

Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* is set in a near-future dystopia where American society is under constant surveillance. The novel places the intimate dimensions of motherhood under strict AI control, using these technologies as instruments of a patriarchal system that may require "bad" mothers to be supervised by robot infants to ensure their behavioral correction. The narrative explores how artificial intelligence reshapes cultural constructions of motherhood, care, and moral responsibility. Rather than presenting AI merely as a technological innovation, the novel integrates algorithmic systems into its narrative structure to systematically observe, record, and evaluate maternal conduct.

The school, characterized by its robotic infants and continuous testing, functions as a disciplinary site where artificial care surrogates displace authentic human relationships and convert intimacy into data. Its simulations reproduce the conditions of motherhood while eliminating the reciprocal, unpredictable, and historically situated dimensions of human care. In this sense, robotic children are not neutral technological aids but instruments of institutional power: they make maternal behavior permanently visible, comparable, and correctable. Through the protagonist, Frida, Chan exposes the violent contradiction at the center of this algorithmic gaze. Although the system claims to identify and correct inadequate care, it is fundamentally incapable of recognizing the nuances of fatigue, uncertainty, ambivalence, and affection. Consequently, Frida is compelled not simply to care for the child but to demonstrate care in forms obedient to the system, adopting a rigid and performative maternal identity. The novel suggests that AI-mediated surveillance does not improve motherhood; rather, it intensifies patriarchal discipline by replacing trust and relational understanding with institutional measurement.

The novel critiques the integration of AI-based surveillance into the domestic sphere by showing how continuous monitoring, numerical evaluation, and simulation transform maternal labor into a measurable and governable object. These technologies do not merely observe motherhood; they actively produce the standards by which it is judged. By reducing care to behavioral indicators, the system treats maternal competence as a fixed, quantifiable performance while disregarding the emotional, embodied, and situational dimensions of caregiving. The apparent objectivity of algorithmic assessment therefore conceals a deeply normative structure: the system determines in advance which emotions, reactions, and caregiving practices count as evidence of maternal worth.

At the outset of the novel, the protagonist, a Chinese American single mother named Frida, has ended her marriage to her white husband, Gust, because of his adultery during her pregnancy. The narrative then follows Frida as she struggles with the consequences of her circumstances. A crucial incident with her young daughter, Harriet, leads to state intervention and rigorous monitoring of her maternal qualifications. This intervention results in her compulsory enrollment in a state-sponsored rehabilitation program, metaphorically called "The School for Good Mothers," where her parenting capabilities are systematically evaluated and policed. Through this speculative framework, Chan thus appears to offer a critical examination of anxieties surrounding care and motherhood.

In this institution, mothers like Frida are subjected to constant scrutiny, with their every action and even emotional state being monitored through sophisticated surveillance technologies, including robotic surrogate children equipped with cameras and sensors to detect nuances of affection, stress, and insincerity. This technological observation extends to all aspects of their lives, transforming the private realm of motherhood into a public spectacle governed by algorithmic assessment. Hamacher defines surveillance in motherhood as "the capacity to reinforce divisions, to categorize and classify, to direct

desires and transmit judgment as well as to coerce and control" (Hamacher & Hankey, 2023, p.11) This may be interpreted as an extension of the paradigm of intensive mothering into a societal expectation that women fully dedicate themselves to child-rearing, into a system in which maternal behavior leads to state-governed education that strictly defines and enforces what constitutes "good" mothering.

The Surveillance Apparatus of the Home: From Camera Installation to Conditioning

The novel's narration opens with the day Frida describes as the worst of her life: she left her daughter, Harriet, unattended for two hours. After this incident, a neighbor reported her to the authorities, and her daughter was taken away. From that point on, her perception of motherhood becomes inevitably linked to state surveillance, patriarchal judgment, and "how state institutions work together to define, monitor, and control maternal behavior" (Tahniah & Wulandari, 2025, p. 248). From the moment Frida's investigation begins, she is under strict scrutiny from the supervisors at Child Protection Services. The supervisors' apparent lack of empathy for Frida's explanations—specifically regarding her fatigue and temporal disorientation—suggests a systemic disregard for the subject's context. This lack of understanding highlights the dehumanizing aspect of a system that prioritizes objective metrics over subjective experiences, particularly for mothers who deviate from idealized norms. This algorithmic gaze, which measures and categorizes maternal performance through continuous monitoring of emotions and behaviors, begins even before the court decision: the state installs cameras all around Frida's house except in the bathroom with her full consent, enabling the state to analyze her feelings, establish universal standards for subjectivity, and enforce "objective" judgments on her motherhood.

Frida is compelled to perform an idealized version of motherhood under patriarchal scrutiny, as pre-trial surveillance transforms private maternal struggles into quantifiable data. The state officials installing the cameras claim that, through this surveillance footage, the state will analyze her feelings, set universal standards for subjectivity and bias, and implement new standards. Although the state claims that such surveillance facilitates objective decision-making, it may instead catalyze the transformation of motherhood into a performative act, in which the patriarchal apparatus mandates specific maternal behaviors. "Sitting in the rocking chair, Frida wept, angry that she had to fake it when she had no tears left. But no tears would suggest that she's an even worse mother than the state imagines" (Chan, 2022, p. 37). Under the camera's gaze in her home, Frida feels compelled to constantly perform the role of the "good mother" to conform to societal expectations, thereby transforming her private life into a public act of continuous monitoring and scrutiny. She begins to think, "she must show them that she is wrestling with her guilt. The more she suffers, the more she cries, the more they'll respect her" (Chan, 2022, p. 66).

These children, designated as 'dolls' by Ms. Russo, appear to represent the zenith of contemporary robotics and artificial intelligence. They can move and speak and smell and feel like real children. They can hear. They can think. They are sentient beings with age-appropriate brain development, memory, and knowledge. In terms of size and abilities, they resemble a child of about eighteen to twenty months. (Chan, 2022, p.110)

These robotic surrogates use advanced AI to mimic the senses and thinking of real toddlers. This design appears to establish a controlled environment intended to modify maternal behavioral patterns. The robot child also serves as an advanced surveillance tool. It collects biometric data from the assigned "mother"—such as heart rate, temperature, posture, and the authenticity of her emotions—to assess her parenting fitness (Capers, 2023, p. 2045).

Race, Class, and the Intersectional Architecture of Maternal Surveillance

Although existing scholarship on *The School for Good Mothers* has largely analyzed the novel through the lenses of gender, surveillance, and intensive mothering, an intersectional reading reveals a dimension that is simultaneously obvious and undertheorized: Frida's positioning as a Chinese-American single mother of modest means situates her within a long historical lineage of mothers whose parenting has been discredited precisely because of their race and class location. Chan's novel thus cannot be understood solely as a narrative about gender; it must also be read in the context of the algorithmic intensification of maternal surveillance, which falls disproportionately on those whose suitability for motherhood has historically been regarded as conditional.

Zhou's review of *Supervision: On Motherhood and Surveillance* further clarifies this dynamic: "...this book critically questions and confronts the conventional views of motherhood that are often based on white, middle-class ideals. It examines how these standards have shaped the surveillance practices, expectations, and severity imposed on mothers from other backgrounds" (Zhou, 2024, p.207). The same volume underscores the burden placed on Black mothers, "who have historically been 'sexualized, demonized, and policed'" (Zhou, 2024, p.207), and gives additional attention to incarcerated mothers, transnational migrant mothers, teenage Black mothers, transgender mothers, and Native mothers. In this sense, Chan's novel belongs to a broader contemporary interrogation of how surveillance is calibrated by racial and class hierarchies—even when its surface vocabulary presents itself as a universal, gender-neutral concern for child welfare.

This intersectional architecture has solid consequences for Frida's representation. She is, on the one hand, a presentable professional whose transgression appears to be a single moment of exhaustion; on the other, she is a woman whose racialized identity places her precisely at the intersection that Cappellini and her co-authors describe when they observe that "deviants, criminals and, as some have argued, bad mothers, who often coincide with working class mothers deviating from the middle class ideals of intensive mothering" (Cappellini et al., 2019, p. 473). The novel does not explicitly invoke Frida's race or class as a cause of her enrollment—rather, the bureaucratic machinery is presented as objective, color-blind, and gender-neutral—but this formal objectivity is precisely the ideological operation that intersectional surveillance studies identify. L. J. Arnold's comparative reading of contemporary dystopian maternity narratives reinforces this point: Chan, she argues, "explores the consequences of surveillance culture particularly for mothers from marginalized groups" (Arnold, 2025, p. 87). The disturbing singularity of Frida's case—the cameras, the year-long program, the specter of permanent termination of parental rights—thus appears less as the future of all mothers and more as the future already experienced, in different registers, by mothers of color and poor mothers in the present.

The Institution as Panoptic Prison: Discipline, Punishment, and Internalized Surveillance

While Foucault famously popularized the term "panopticon" by illuminating the connections between surveillance and modernity as a disciplinary practice, Jeremy Bentham first introduced his plan for the "Panopticon" penitentiary in 1791 (Lyon, 1994, p. 63). In the introduction to *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond*, David Lyon examines whether the panopticon remains an adequate framework for understanding contemporary surveillance. Addressing this question, he observes: "We cannot evade some interaction with the panopticon, either historically, or in today's analyses of surveillance" (Lyon, 2006, p. 4). David Lyon, in his book, *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of the Surveillance Society*, discusses the development of surveillance in his chapter titled "From Big Brother to the Electronic Panopticon". The chapter's main argument is to survey surveillance and the

panopticon. When considering George Orwell's 1984, Lyon notes that, while writing this world classic, Orwell "never imagined how rapidly surveillance would extend its global reach" (Lyon, 1994, p. 58). Using Orwell's 1984 as a starting point, Lyon depicts the novel as a representation of how "the power of technology is used for social control" (Lyon, 1994, p. 59), much like how surveillance power is used in the fictional school in Chan's novel. In his survey of surveillance, Lyon also draws on Gary T. Marx's concept of the "new surveillance." As Lyon summarizes it, what is new about these technologies is that "they are invisible, involuntary, ... involve decentralized self-policing" (Lyon, 1994, p. 68). Marx's three features of the "new surveillance" map closely onto the regime Chan depicts. The school's observation is invisible: it is not an architecture the mothers can see, but sensors embedded in the dolls' bodies. It is involuntary: Frida's enrollment is court-ordered, and the pre-trial cameras are installed throughout her home, formally "with her full consent," yet under conditions in which refusal is indistinguishable from further evidence of maternal failure. Moreover, it involves decentralized self-policing: the monitoring is not sustained by a visible watcher but by the mothers themselves. Where Bentham's inspector had to be feared as possibly present, the doll's sensors need not be seen. However, they must be obeyed: the mothers internalize the metrics and produce the surveillance themselves. In this sense, Chan's school realizes precisely the shift from Big Brother to the electronic panopticon that Lyon's chapter describes. The mothers lose their sense of privacy because they are under constant surveillance. This environment of constant monitoring forces the mothers to comply with the rules of good motherhood, showing forced affection to their robot babies.

The institution also employs strict surveillance, and the pervasive sense of being watched may parallel Foucault's conceptualization of the Panopticon, in which internalized disciplinary practices compel individuals to self-regulate their behavior as if they were perpetually under observation (Cappellini et al., 2019). Constant surveillance turns motherhood into something conditional, in which AI children record tone, gestures, and emotional authenticity, and ultimately produce data reports on maternal adequacy. The mothers internalize surveillance through the continuous regulation of their emotional responses toward the robotic entities. A sense of discipline and punishment hangs over the time the mothers spend in this state facility. "It's certainly starting to feel like prison. What she imagines of prison. Permission to leave the room. Permission to eat. Permission to use the bathroom. Activities monitored and preordained. Someone else deciding how her time will be spent and in what room and with what people" (Chan, 2022, p. 115). Regarding punishment, the most effective way to discipline mothers who perform poorly on their weekly exams is to revoke their phone privileges. This disciplinary mechanism parallels Foucault's analysis of "the Panopticon creates docile bodies which have internalized disciplinary practices and act as if they are constantly under surveillance even when they are not (Cappellini et al., 2019, p.473).

The disciplinary gaze analyzed above is not only vertical; it is also horizontal, exercised by mothers upon one another long before the state intervenes. As Capers observes, channeling Melissa Murray, mothers are subject to "the routine surveillance from other mothers," the "harsh scrutiny of 'the Panopti-mom,'" a deliberate play on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison (Capers, 2023, p.2056). Murray coined the term "Panopti-mom" to describe a culture of motherhood in which mothers are criticized and scrutinize themselves and others because the culture that they live in instills "a sense of near-constant surveillance" (Murray, 2013, p.166). Chan provides many examples in the novel in which both mothers criticize other mothers and women who are not mothers and feel justified in being skeptical about Frida's motherhood. Before she enters the school of good motherhood, she is criticized by her ex-husband's new girlfriend. She continuously gives her advice about the fact that she should "eliminate all plastic from her household...She should install a water filtration system so Harriet won't be exposed to heavy metals and

chlorine in her drinking water at bath time" (Chan, 2022, p.34). Frida also remembers being criticized for gazing at the newspaper when her daughter was playing in the playground; having her silently play was not enough motherhood because a child should "hear ten thousand words a day, from birth until age five, in order to be prepared for kindergarten" (Chan, 2022, p. 36). After she enters the school, she meets other mothers from different races and classes, who were also accused of being "bad mothers" by people who have, in one way or another, gazed at them and "graded" their sense of motherhood. Ironically, the school does not abolish this communal gaze; the mothers keep gazing and judging each other, but at the same time there is for every single mother the robot-doll that continuously surveils their actions of motherhood and records and evaluates their state of motherhood.

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, including whether her happiness mirrors her doll's. (Chan, 2022, p. 111)

Motherhood is often conceptualized as an unattainable standard; in the novel, this expectation is reduced to a performative spectacle, in which the state actively constructs and reinforces idealized maternal archetypes through technological and psychological manipulation. Adrienne Rich, in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, distinguishes between the lived experience of mothering and motherhood as a patriarchal institution that polices women's reproductive roles. The former refers to the emotional experience of mothering, whereas the latter functions as a structural constraint within patriarchal society. The novel appears to elucidate this dynamic by rendering mothers' personal practices into quantifiable data, thereby enforcing societal norms through technological mechanisms. While Rich characterizes the experience of mothering as potentially creative and meaningful, she argues that the institutionalization of motherhood remains significantly restrictive, governed by systemic control, and inherently political. Echoing Adrienne Rich's critique of motherhood's institutionalization, the novel illustrates how patriarchy demands that women perform idealized roles in an endless competition in which they are ranked and rewarded yet remain replaceable.

More playful motherese. A higher pitch. Higher daily word count. Frida needs to relax. Her temperature and heart rate suggest an unsustainable level of stress. She needs to make more frequent and meaningful eye contact with Emmanuelle. Her touch should be gentler, more loving. Data collected from the doll has suggested substantial amounts of anger and ingratitude. Any negative feelings will impede her progress. (Chan, 2022, p. 132)

This constant monitoring and evaluation of maternal performance exemplifies how the patriarchal institution of motherhood, as outlined by Rich, appears to extend its control into the most intimate aspects of maternal life, potentially shaping the subject through externally imposed archetypes of ideal motherhood. Rich further describes the ideology of the "Good Mother," offering a critical analysis of the cultural construction of the self-sacrificing, perpetually patient maternal figure. Like the unrealistic depiction of motherhood, this ideology serves to discipline women, who are expected to find total fulfillment in motherhood, suppressing anger and ambition. Mothers who cannot achieve this ideal in the novel may appear to experience profound guilt and shame.

As Demirci notes in his analysis of the contemporary family, "the family, historically a site of intimacy and socialization, has become a key biopolitical and surveillance mechanism that integrates individuals into digital regimes of power" (Demirci, 2026, p. 525). Within this framework, algorithmic systems "restructure parenting, reshape privacy boundaries, and mediate intra-family trust through data-driven technologies" (Demirci, 2026, p. 525). Chan's novel captures this transformation precisely: the family is no longer only a private refuge from the state's disciplinary apparatus but the very surface on which that

apparatus is inscribed. This shift from physical confinement to continuous data extraction transforms disciplinary power from a visible architecture into an invisible infrastructure. While the classical Panopticon controlled people by locking them in and keeping them under the constant threat of being watched, today's algorithmic systems work very differently: they continuously gather data from individuals through sensors embedded in everyday environments and intervene in our lives based on predictions about what we will do before we actually do it. Chan extends this logic one step further by removing even the necessity of biological reproduction. The robot child, as an artificial reproductive surrogate, collapses the child's body into pure information: its biometric readings, its emotional data, and its capacity to transmit maternal warmth or its absence to a central algorithmic judge. The mother is reduced to a body of pure data: heart rate, blinking pattern, temperature, and posture.

As a result, Foucault's disciplinary power suggests that Chan is not merely inserting the prison into the home; she is integrating the surveillance infrastructure already existing in contemporary wearable baby monitors, fertility apps, and pediatric surveillance tools into the fully saturated, AI-mediated disciplinary environment of late algorithmic motherhood. The novel thus offers less a distinct future than a sharply illuminated present. In a fictional world where the near-future American society is heavily governed by artificial intelligence, "encompassed looking, watching, and being able to surveil one's child differently than in the past. Technological surveillance had become mandatory" (Hamacher & Hankey, 2023, p.9).

Gendered Surveillance: Mothers Versus Fathers, and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Accountability

The inherent gender inequality within this dystopian system is evident in the disproportionate targeting of mothers, whose maternal behavior is subjected to intense scrutiny and correction. At the same time, fathers' roles and responsibilities remain largely unexamined. Consequently, expectations for behavior change differ noticeably between mothers and fathers.

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, 2022, p.240)

The quotation above not only reflects that fathers are treated differently but also presents a concrete institutional comparison: fathers are allowed greater freedom, are not punished through phone restrictions, are not subjected to the same disciplinary mechanisms, and are actively encouraged to maintain contact with their children. Fathers are considered successful if they have good intentions; however, mothers undergo a much stricter evaluation process on the road to becoming "good mothers". The word "good" is ironic because the patriarchal system demands that they attain a state of perfection that nobody can achieve. While trying to achieve this state of perfection, they experience a continuous feeling of mother guilt. For instance, a supervisor lecturing mothers on the imperatives of maternal conduct explicitly attributes social pathologies—specifically "juvenile delinquency, school shooters, teen pregnancy, and terrorism" (Chan, 2022, p.89)—to deficient motherhood. Such problems are never mentioned in the context of fatherhood. This state-governed curriculum appears anchored in the conservative assumption that rectifying the domestic sphere can stabilize the broader social order. This ideology frames the domestic sphere, particularly the mother's role within it, as the primary site of societal stability and moral order, thereby justifying extensive state intervention and surveillance of

private family life because “the home and women, by association with the domestic sphere, have historically and continue to be a subject and site of surveillance” (Castle, 2025, p.115).

Another striking example that can be provided for the difference between how mothers and fathers are treated differently is the mantras that they must repeat to themselves, as if they are being brainwashed by this dystopian patriarchal system that they must stay in. The mothers are required to say, “I’m a bad mother, but I am learning to be good” (Chan, 2022, p.90), whereas the fathers repeat the mantra “I am a father learning to be a better man” (Chan, 2022, p.242). The mother’s formulation begins with self-condemnation, whereas the father’s formulation does not require him to identify himself as a bad father. Instead, fatherhood is separated from moral failure and is framed as an opportunity to become a better man. This perspective reinforces a gendered division of labor and responsibility, implicitly absolving fathers of equivalent accountability for societal ills and positioning mothers as the primary agents of moral reproduction and social order. Fathers who commit offenses comparable to those of mothers are portrayed as likely to complete the program simply by conveying good intentions toward their children. This stark contrast highlights a fundamental patriarchal bias in the state’s disciplinary apparatus, where male parental failings are treated with tolerance.

The Panopticon Reconfigured: Algorithmic Visibility and the Production of Maternal Subjectivity

Jeremy Bentham conceived the Panopticon as an ideal prison, a circular structure with a central watchtower surrounded by a ring of cells. Although Bentham’s model of the panopticon prison rests on an architectural design, Lyon argues that it was not only a form of punishment; it was also a “clean and rational form of social control” (Lyon, 1994, p. 65). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault transforms this architectural blueprint into a theory of power. The Panopticon’s genius lies not in constant watching but in the possibility of being watched, as inmates, unable to know whether the observer is present, assume surveillance is permanent. This uncertainty is the mechanism of control. Inmates begin to self-regulate, policing their own behavior without any external force. Power becomes self-sustaining, independent of the person who exercises it. The watched becomes their own watcher. As Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the idea of the Panopticon “can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons” (Foucault, 1995, p. 205)—similarly, the fictional school functions as a near-perfect panoptic institution. The AI observer appears to operate without pause or fatigue, suggesting omnipresent monitoring. Mothers are not merely observed; rather, the awareness of this persistent surveillance may reshape every gesture, word, and expression.

Like Bentham’s inmates, the mothers begin to police themselves, performing ideal motherhood not out of love but out of terror of an ever-present gaze. The institution’s surveillance appears fully realized; its judgment may be treated as final; and the capacity for resistance remains constrained. Chan’s novel exposes how the very definition of a “good mother” functions as a disciplinary instrument. The state does not simply punish bad behavior; it produces, codifies, and enforces a normative ideal against which every mother is measured, thereby epitomizing Foucault’s power/knowledge.

The robot child in Chan’s novel is, in many respects, a child: it speaks, smells, feels, thinks, and responds. It possesses “age-appropriate brain development, memory, and knowledge” (Chan, 2022, p. 110). For a mother who has been deprived of her biological daughter, the encounter with the robot child cannot be one-dimensional. Frida’s relationship with the doll she names Emmanuelle is, on the one hand, a kinship relation, an affective bond formed in the intimacy of daily caregiving, and, on the other, a

relation in which every gesture is recollected, quantified, and reduced to a portable disciplinary apparatus entirely indifferent to the emotional accuracy of the bond itself. The doll, in this sense, is not separable from the bond it duplicates; the surveillance it performs is structurally entangled with the very relation of care it appears to enable. Such a configuration cannot simply be refused, for there is no motherhood without relational entanglement. It can, however, be subjected to critical interrogation. The robot child functions as a provocative alternative: it dissociates motherhood from biological reproduction while simultaneously excluding the transformative possibilities that such decentering might create.

The novel preserves the tension at the heart of its exploration of motherhood and surveillance. The robot child is simultaneously the mother's most intimate companion and the most dangerous opponent, both nurturing her and legitimizing the very surveillance apparatus that confines her. From this perspective, *The School for Good Mothers* is not simply a novel about AI and motherhood; it interrogates the forms of kinship that contemporary regimes of digital governance are willing to recognize, as well as the affective bonds they are structurally unable to accommodate.

Care as Measured Performance: Empathy and the Algorithm of Affection

Finally, on the theme of care, the novel shows how the state transforms maternal affection into a measured performance. This surveillance appears to dehumanize the expression of authentic emotional bonds. Specifically, the requirement that mothers care for sentient robot doppelgängers of their children, programmed to collect biometric and emotional data, transforms nurturing into a monitored performance rather than an uncoerced bond. This process reduces the care and affection mothers are supposed to give their children to measurable, performative acts in which they are expected to show their robot babies constant empathy, love, and attention, leaving mothers isolated and without any sense of empathy for them. This commodification of care is further reinforced by the number of hugs and kisses a mother should give her robot baby, as documented through surveillance. For instance, the instructor advises mothers to hug their children for only three seconds, assuming this is the healthiest form of mother-child bond and allows only five or six seconds "if the child is injured or has experienced verbal, emotional, or physical trauma" (Chan, 2022, p. 118). Since motherhood and care are depicted as a kind of performance in this institution, Frida struggles to distinguish what she sincerely feels for her daughter, Harriet, from what she is expected to perform for the robot-child Emmanuelle. These artificially imposed modes of behavior lead Frida to feel like an insufficient mother, as stated in the following lines: "She is a bad mother because her affection is perfunctory towards her robot-child" (Chan, 2022, p. 139).

Ultimately, care emerges as a mechanism of institutional control; it is removed from the mother and transferred to state-employed supervisors and evaluators. In other words, care is not a relationship between the mother and the child; it is regulated, and since robot-children are not human yet still require emotional labor, care becomes an empty repetition rather than a bond between mother and child.

Salje's recent work on "carework and empathy" offers a particularly insightful vocabulary for this concept. Empathy with children, she argues, "is an active and normally temporally extended exploration of the target subject's complex and dynamic emotional life, guided by an epistemic aim of psychological understanding." This exploration "is liable to disable the caregiver's normal emotional functioning in a way that can give rise to a sense of self-alienation" (Salje, 2025, p. 26). The novel stages this self-

alienation precisely: Frida's perception that she cannot tell whether she loves her biological daughter or merely performs a state-mandated simulation of loving her robotic substitute is not a sign of mental collapse but a logical consequence of an institutional regime in which empathy itself is instrumented and quantified.

The care mothers provide for their robot children may not only be observed but also quantified, algorithmically analyzed, and weaponized to enforce strict obedience. This systematic monitoring may strip the maternal relationship of its natural value, forcing an organic emotional bond to mutate into a rigid, performative act calibrated to state-mandated metrics. By reducing the nuance of human affection to binary data points, the institution exerts control, ensuring that the emerging threat of judgment shapes every gesture. This quantification appears intended to replace maternal instinct with conditioned, mechanical obedience, effectively transforming the domestic sphere into a site of data-driven correction, as evidenced by the following directive: "The recordings will be analyzed for the number of encouraging phrases versus the amount of warning or scolding. Too many noes will cause the word counter to beep like a car alarm, and only the instructors can turn it off." (Chan, 2022, p. 151).

Conclusion

The novel's central insight, however, is that surveillance does not merely regulate maternal identity; it actively produces it. Through the robot child, Chan makes visible the process by which affection is detached from spontaneity and reorganized as a measurable performance. Mothers are required not simply to love, but to demonstrate love through prescribed gestures, verbal formulas, and carefully monitored emotional responses. Consequently, the robot child functions as both a technological instrument of surveillance and a symbol of the state's attempt to standardize the maternal bond. What appears to be a test of care ultimately becomes a test of compliance, exposing how institutional power transforms intimate feelings into data and domestic life into an extension of bureaucratic authority.

Chan's critique also extends beyond the individual mother's apparent failure. The novel reveals that judgments of "bad motherhood" are shaped by racialized and class-based assumptions, even when the disciplinary regime presents itself as universal. Its standards therefore do not simply identify inadequate mothers; they reproduce the historical exclusions embedded in the ideal of intensive, self-sacrificing motherhood. By presenting care as an endlessly measurable performance, the novel shows how contemporary technologies can intensify these inequalities while concealing them beneath the language of objectivity, safety, and efficiency. Eventually, *The School for Good Mothers* reconceptualizes the family as a disciplinary apparatus through which the state commodifies care, isolates women, and redefines maternal intimacy according to algorithmic norms. The novel serves not only as a warning about future technologies but also as a provocation to question the systems already transforming care into surveillance and to resist the algorithmic domestication of motherhood.

Considering surveillance, *The School for Good Mothers* reveals that racial and class-based assumptions about which mothers are viewed as "bad" remain embedded within supposedly universal disciplinary regimes. Although the institution presents its standards as neutral and objective, these standards reproduce the historical exclusions underlying the ideal of intensive, self-sacrificing motherhood. The novel therefore does not depict a singular future but rather intensifies tendencies already visible in fertility apps, infant wearables, and pediatric AI-tracking systems, where maternal subjectivity is converted into a continuous stream of algorithmically processed signals. Within this system, the robot child functions simultaneously as a companion, a monitoring device, and an instrument for producing

performative motherhood. The mother is not evaluated simply by whether she feels affection; she must translate that affection into visible, measurable, and institutionally approved behaviors. As a result, sincere emotional attachment is transformed into exhausting and repetitive labor, while the distinction between authentic maternal feeling and a merely “good” imitation of it gradually dissolves. By universalizing and quantifying the maternal bond, the institution does not protect motherhood but reorganizes it as a technology of obedience, making emotional conformity appear indistinguishable from care.

Furthermore, the narrative demonstrates that maternal identity is not merely monitored by artificial intelligence systems and pervasive algorithmic assessments; it is actively produced, codified, and normalized through them. By converting care into observable data and institutional performance, these systems deprive mothers of the authority to define their own emotional experiences and make agency conditional upon compliance with externally imposed standards. The robotic surrogate children are therefore neither simple substitutes for biological children nor neutral tools of evaluation. They function as disciplinary instruments through which the state teaches mothers how to feel, speak, and behave, transforming maternal affection into measurable labor. In this system, care becomes valuable only when it is clear to institutional authority: emotions that cannot be translated into approved words, gestures, and behavioral patterns are rendered suspect, regardless of their sincerity. The novel thus exposes a crucial contradiction at the heart of algorithmic care. Although the system claims to protect children by eliminating subjective judgment, it expands state power by defining which emotions count as evidence of responsible motherhood.

References / Kaynakça

- Arnold, L. (2025). *The never good enough mother: Escaping motherhood in two contemporary novels*. *Literatura*, 67(4), 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Litera.2025.67.4.7>
- Cappellini, B., Harman, V., Marilli, A., & Parsons, E. (2019). *Intensive mothering in hard times: Foucauldian ethical self-formation and cruel optimism*. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 19(4), 469–492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540519872067>
- Capers, I. B. (2023). *Policing "bad" mothers*. *Harvard Law Review*, 136(8), 2044–2077. <https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-136/policing-bad-mothers/>
- Castle, A. J. (2025). *Let's play surveillance: The panoptic affect of talking dolls in the domestic sphere*. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, 26(1), 110–126. <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2025.008>
- Chan, J. (2022). *The School for Good Mothers*. Simon & Schuster
- Demirci, M. R. (2026). Biopolitics, Digital Surveillance, and the Transformation of the Family. *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 12(Aile Özel Sayısı), 525–544. <https://doi.org/10.31592/aeusbed.1809352>
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.)—Vintage Books.
- Hamacher, S., & Hankey, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Supervision: On motherhood and surveillance*. The MIT Press.
- Lyon, D. (1994). *The electronic eye: The rise of surveillance society*. Polity Press.
- Lyon, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Theorizing surveillance: The panopticon and beyond*. Willan Publishing
- Murray, M. (2013). Panopti-Moms. *Calif. L. Rev. Circuit*, 4, 165.
- Salje, L. (2025). Minding the Children: Carework, Empathy, and the Phinneas Gage Effect. *Philosophy*, 100(1), 26–49.
- Tahniah, S., & Wulandari, R. S. (2025). *Constructing the good mother: Patriarchal control in Jessamine Chan's The School for Good Mothers*. *Rainbow: Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Culture Studies*, 14, 248–258. <https://doi.org/10.15294/rainbow.v14i.29923>
- Zhou, K. (2024). Review of *Supervision: On motherhood and surveillance* (S. Hamacher & J. Hankey, Eds.). *Surveillance & Society*, 22(2), 207–208. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i2.17670>