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## Interrogating Institutionalized Discrimination: Gender, Motherhood, and the Struggle for Agency in *The School for Good Mothers*

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the systemic oppression and the protagonist's struggle for autonomy within a dystopian framework. Employing a qualitative descriptive method through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, the analysis identifies three core mechanisms of gender inequality: the "othering" of women, the enforcement of restrictive social roles, and pervasive social conditioning. The research demonstrates how the protagonist, Frida, is institutionally constructed as an "unfit" mother and subjected to carceral surveillance designed to enforce monolithic, patriarchal ideals of motherhood. It further examines Frida's fraught attempts to reclaim her agency and identity against a punitive system that pathologizes maternal deviation. Ultimately, the findings posit the novel as a critical allegory for how institutionalized gender biases violently constrain women's freedom, while Frida's resilient, though imperfect, resistance underscores the enduring necessity of the fight for existential self-determination and genuine equality.*

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**Keywords:** *de Beauvoir, feminism, gender inequality, women's struggle*

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## INTRODUCTION

In literature, narratives of discrimination function not merely as plot devices but as critical lenses through which the structural fissures of society are magnified and scrutinized. Jessamine Chan's 2022 novel, *The School for Good Mothers*, stands as a potent contemporary exemplar, crafting a dystopian allegory where the pervasive injustice of gendered expectations is rendered into a terrifying institutional reality. This thesis posits that the novel's exploration of systemic bias provides a narrative corollary to sociological definitions of inequality, specifically understood as the unfair and avoidable differences arising from entrenched structural disadvantage (Heise et al., 2019). Within this framework, the discrimination faced by the protagonist, Frida, transcends individual failing, emerging instead from a punitive system designed to enforce a rigid, idealized motherhood.

The conceptual bedrock of this analysis is found in Simone de Beauvoir's foundational assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"—a process of social conditioning that forcibly aligns female identity with prescribed roles (1949). De Beauvoir's concept of woman as "The Other" is vital, illuminating how societal institutions actively construct and patrol the boundaries of acceptable femininity. *The School for Good Mothers* literalizes this theory, depicting a carceral system that pathologizes and seeks to "reform" maternal conduct, thus violently actualizing the process of "becoming" a compliant gendered subject. Frida's ordeal—her surveillance, judgment, and forced pedagogical correction—epitomizes the mechanisms through which gender inequality is manifested and perpetuated in everyday life, moving from abstract prejudice to tangible, life-altering discipline.

This research contends that Frida's discrimination is tripartite, experienced through exclusion, restrictive roles, and intensive social conditioning. Her expulsion from the category of "good mother" and consequent separation from her child represent a profound form of social and legal exclusion. The reformatory "School" itself imposes an arsenal of restrictive roles, defining motherhood through a monolithic, emotionlessly perfect standard that erases individual circumstance and humanity. Ultimately, the program is an extreme engine of social conditioning, aiming to break and remake Frida's instincts, emotions, and very psyche to conform to an external ideal.

However, the narrative's power resides not solely in its depiction of oppression but in Frida's fraught resistance. This thesis will therefore also examine her nascent, often desperate, efforts to reclaim her rights as a free subject to assert her own flawed humanity against an impersonal system. This struggle mirrors the forms of resistance noted in feminist discourse, such as the pursuit of autonomous self-definition and the forging of solidarity, or "sisterhood," as outlined by scholars like Hook (2000). Furthermore, Chan's novel implicitly insists that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation; Frida's experience is compounded by intersecting factors of class, race, and educational background, illustrating how axes of stratification intensify societal disadvantage.

By synthesizing de Beauvoir's philosophical framework with a contemporary literary dystopia, this investigation seeks to demonstrate how *The School for Good Mothers* serves as a critical cultural diagnostic. It reveals that the most insidious forms of gender inequality are not only interpersonal but are institutionalized, transforming difference into deviance and deploying systemic power to enforce compliance, thus rendering the personal tragically and inescapably political.

## METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to explore the representation of gender inequality in Jessamine Chan's novel *The School for Good Mothers* (2022). Qualitative research is grounded in constructivist assumptions, which view reality as plural, subjective, and socially constructed through human interaction. This approach is appropriate for literary analysis because it allows for in-depth interpretation of characters, dialogue, and narrative structures.

The primary data consist of textual excerpts from the novel, including narration and dialogues involving the main character, Frida Liu, as well as other significant characters such as Gust, Harriet, and Susan. These excerpts were selected based on their relevance to indicators of gender inequality, particularly forms of exclusion (othering), social conditioning, and restrictive gender roles. Specific attention was given to narrative moments that depict Frida being labeled an "unfit" mother and the institutional use of technologically advanced robotic baby dolls as surveillance tools enforcing artificial standards of motherhood. Frida's interactions with instructors and authorities at the rehabilitation center were also analyzed to identify systemic pressures and moral double standards that disproportionately scrutinize women while minimizing male accountability.

Data collection was conducted through close reading. The researcher read the novel multiple times to ensure comprehensive understanding and accurate interpretation. Relevant passages containing themes of inequality, discrimination, and oppression were identified, categorized, and documented.

The data were analyzed using Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework, particularly her concept of woman as the "Other" as articulated in *The Second Sex* (1949). This theoretical perspective guided the interpretation of how patriarchal structures shape women's experiences, identities, and struggles within the narrative.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A close reading of Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* reveals that the gender inequality confronting Frida is not a series of isolated incidents but a coherent, multi-layered architecture of oppression. This system operates simultaneously on interpersonal, institutional, and internalized planes, leveraging not only gender but also intersecting axes of race and class to enforce subjugation. The selected data points coalesce to illustrate a devastating trajectory: from external judgment and institutional surveillance to economic stripping and, ultimately, the collapse of the autonomous self.

### Patriarchal Judgment and "Othering"

The novel immediately grounds Frida's crisis in the interpersonal dynamics of patriarchal authority. Data 1 (Gust's reprimand, "Why would you do that?... You could have called me.") is a foundational moment of what de Beauvoir termed "othering."

Gust positions himself as the rational arbiter of correct motherhood, framing Frida's isolated, stressed decision as an illogical error rather than a contextual action. This dialogue enacts a common gender schema where male judgment is presumed objective and female action is pathologized as inherently suspect. It establishes the thematic framework that the subsequent institutional machinery will brutally amplify: the mother is not a full subject, but a flawed object in need of correction.

### **Surveillance and the Erosion of Personhood**

The true horror of the novel lies in how this interpersonal bias is systematized. Data 2 and 3 demonstrate the swift transition from social judgment to literal state control. The inspector's chilling remark, "If you want to leave the house whenever you feel like it, you get a dog, not a kid" (Data 2), criminalizes maternal autonomy, redefining a universal human need (respite, freedom of movement) as a moral failing specific to mothers. This ideology justifies the institutional invasion depicted in Data 3: the installation of surveillance cameras. This act transforms the private, intimate sphere of the home—traditionally, yet problematically, considered the woman's domain—into a panopticon. The home is no longer a sanctuary but the primary site of disciplinary observation, rendering Frida's every gesture potentially deviant. This institutional surveillance constitutes a profound violation, treating motherhood not as a relationship but as a performance to be constantly monitored and assessed.

### **The Compound Weight of Race and Class**

Frida's experience is crucially compounded by her identity as an Asian American woman and her precarious class position, illustrating how systems of discrimination interlock to multiply disadvantage. Data 4 and 5 explicitly tackle the racist and cultural double binds she navigates. The description of Susanna as "the most palatable kind of Asian" (Data 4) unveils a hierarchy of acceptability within racial categorization, where assimilation into white, professional norms (academic class) is rewarded, while ethnic identity tied to labor or refugee status is denigrated. Frida internalizes this toxic rubric, judging herself as never "Chinese enough" nor "American enough" (Data 5). Her motherhood is thus judged against an impossible standard that is simultaneously gendered and racialized; she fails as a mother *because* she is perceived as failing at a monolithic, idealized racial identity.

This racialized judgment is inextricable from economic vulnerability. Data 6 and 7 highlight the structural economic inequalities that render Frida uniquely exposed. Her difficulty finding "a decent job" (Data 6) post-relocation underscores the labor market's gendered and racialized barriers. This financial precarity is weaponized against her in the divorce settlement (Data 7), where the "mediator"—a figure of the system—sanctions an alimony amount "not nearly enough" for survival. This decision economically infantilizes Frida, forcing dependence while simultaneously penalizing her for the career sacrifice (leaving her New York job) that the gendered expectation of childcare demanded. The system extracts her labor—both professional and maternal—while refusing to provide the material means for autonomy, creating a perfect trap.

### **Internalized Oppression and Psychic Collapse**

The cumulative effect of this multi-systemic assault is not merely social or economic, but existential, as devastatingly captured in Data 8: “Sometimes she wanted to die; she hated the sight of her own face in the mirror.” This represents the final, harrowing stage of oppression: internalization. The constant judgment (interpersonal), surveillance (institutional), and racial/economic degradation (intersectional) strip Frida of her subjectivity. She ceases to be a person making choices and becomes a collection of assessed failures. The self-loathing and desire for self-annihilation signify the ultimate victory of the carceral system: the internalized “Othering” de Beauvoir described is now complete. The gaze of the state, the ex-husband, and the social worker has been supplanted by her own self-negating gaze in the mirror.

### **Discussion: From Dystopia to Diagnosis**

These findings collectively argue that *The School for Good Mothers* is less a speculative fantasy than a logical extension of existing patriarchal, racist, and classist logics. Chan’s dystopia makes visible the latent carceral potential within the societal obsession with “perfect” motherhood. The novel demonstrates that gender inequality, when institutionalized, moves beyond disparity to become a form of governance that polices the boundaries of identity itself.

Frida’s struggle, therefore, is the struggle to remain a “free subject” under totalizing pressure. While the School seeks to condition her into a compliant archetype, her very psychological unraveling—a symptom of oppression—is also a testament to the violent incompatibility between her complex humanity and the simplistic mold she is forced into. The novel forces the reader to ask: Is the “good mother” it seeks to produce actually a fully human subject, or a sanitized, subjugated object? In portraying the systematic destruction of a woman through the very institutions purportedly designed to uphold family and society, Chan issues a formidable critique: the pursuit of an idealized, monitored, and racially/ economically exclusive motherhood is not a path to social good, but a blueprint for profound injustice and psychic violence. The school’s pedagogy is, in the end, a curriculum in eradication—not of maternal failure, but of maternal selfhood.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Jessamine Chan’s *The School for Good Mothers* transcends its dystopian frame to deliver a profound and urgent social critique, laying bare the carceral logic that often underpins societal conceptions of motherhood. Through the visceral ordeal of Frida Liu, the novel meticulously charts how gender inequality is systematized, moving from interpersonal prejudice to full-scale institutional domination. This research has demonstrated that Frida’s persecution is not a punishment for a singular failing, but a structured process designed to dismantle her autonomy, leveraging intersecting vectors of race and class to compound her subjugation. The school’s pedagogy, far from being rehabilitative, operates as a mechanism of social control, seeking to erase individual subjectivity and replace it with a state-approved maternal archetype.

The novel's power lies in its relentless exposure of how discrimination, when codified into policy and technology, becomes a form of governance. The derogatory judgments of inspectors, the invasive home surveillance, and the brutal economic penalties are not exaggerated fictions but logical extensions of real-world biases that scrutinize, judge, and punish mothers—particularly those who are marginalized—for any deviation from an impossible standard. By framing maternal “error” as a crime requiring corrective incarceration, Chan holds a mirror to a society that rhetorically venerates motherhood while systematically refusing the material and social conditions necessary for maternal flourishing.

Ultimately, *The School for Good Mothers* is a clarion call to recognize women's fundamental rights not *despite* their roles as mothers, but intrinsically, as autonomous subjects. Frida's journey from perceived incompetence to internalized self-loathing underscores a devastating truth: the greatest violence of structural oppression is its capacity to make the oppressed complicit in their own erasure. Therefore, this research underscores that challenging such systems requires more than incremental reform; it demands a radical reimagining of motherhood itself—divorced from patriarchal, racist, and classist expectations, and rooted instead in agency, dignity, and substantive support.

The novel, and this analysis of it, emphasizes the critical need for sustained, intersectional dialogue about the architectures of inequality. It pushes us to interrogate the subtle and overt ways social institutions police women's bodies and choices, and to actively dismantle the frameworks that equate conformity with goodness. Supporting fundamental studies of women's struggles is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary step toward building a world where the title of “mother” is not a sentence to surveillance and judgment, but a affirmation of a free and self-determined human being.

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