

Algorithmic Patriarchy and the Surveillance of Motherhood in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*

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Abstract

Jessamine Chan's debut novel *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) presents a dystopian vision in which motherhood is subjected to algorithmic surveillance, institutional regulation, and technological discipline. The novel explores how digital governance transforms maternal care into a measurable performance, reducing women to data-driven subjects whose competence is continuously evaluated through technological systems. This paper argues that Chan's narrative illustrates the emergence of **algorithmic patriarchy**, a contemporary form of patriarchal control that operates through artificial intelligence, surveillance technologies, and bureaucratic institutions rather than through overt coercion alone. Drawing upon feminist theories of patriarchy, surveillance studies, and cyberfeminism, this study analyses how digital technologies reproduce traditional gender hierarchies while presenting themselves as objective and neutral mechanisms of governance. The paper further examines how the novel critiques intensive motherhood, institutional power, and algorithmic decision-making that disproportionately target women. By integrating the theoretical insights of Kate Manne, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Shoshana Zuboff, and Safiya Umoja Noble, the study demonstrates that surveillance technologies become instruments of gendered discipline that normalize patriarchal expectations under the guise of child welfare and technological efficiency. Ultimately, *The School for Good Mothers* reveals that algorithmic governance threatens women's autonomy by converting motherhood into a permanently monitored social performance. The paper concludes that Chan's novel functions as a feminist warning against the increasing dependence on artificial intelligence and digital surveillance in regulating intimate aspects of human life.

Keywords: Algorithmic Patriarchy, Digital Surveillance, Motherhood, Feminism, Artificial Intelligence, Jessamine Chan, Cyberfeminism

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of digital technologies into nearly every sphere of human life. Artificial intelligence, predictive algorithms, biometric monitoring, facial recognition systems, and data analytics increasingly influence governance, healthcare, education, employment, and social relationships. These technological developments are frequently celebrated as objective, efficient, and impartial mechanisms capable of improving public welfare. However, contemporary feminist scholars have questioned this assumption by arguing that digital technologies often reproduce existing social inequalities rather than eliminating them. Algorithms are designed by human institutions, trained on historical datasets, and deployed within political and economic

systems already shaped by gendered power relations. Consequently, artificial intelligence frequently inherits and amplifies patriarchal values embedded within society.

Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) offers one of the most compelling literary explorations of this phenomenon. Set in a near-future America, the novel imagines a society in which mothers deemed insufficiently competent are sent to a government-operated institution where they undergo compulsory behavioural training under constant technological surveillance. Through the experiences of Frida Liu, the protagonist, Chan examines how motherhood becomes a site of institutional control mediated by artificial intelligence, robotic monitoring, and algorithmic assessment. The narrative extends beyond conventional discussions of parenting by exposing how digital technologies become instruments through which patriarchal ideologies are disguised as scientific objectivity and bureaucratic necessity.

The novel is particularly significant because it shifts the focus of feminist criticism from traditional forms of patriarchal domination to technologically mediated systems of governance. Unlike earlier dystopian fiction, where state violence is often visible and authoritarian, Chan depicts a society in which surveillance operates subtly through data collection, behavioural evaluation, and algorithmic judgement. Mothers are no longer disciplined solely by family structures or cultural expectations; instead, they are evaluated by technological systems claiming neutrality while reinforcing normative ideals of femininity, care, and domestic responsibility. This transformation reflects broader concerns regarding the increasing reliance on artificial intelligence in social decision-making.

The concept of **algorithmic patriarchy** provides an effective framework for understanding these developments. Algorithmic patriarchy refers to the reproduction of patriarchal power through computational systems that appear objective while perpetuating gendered assumptions and discriminatory practices. Unlike conventional patriarchy, which depends primarily upon visible social institutions, algorithmic patriarchy functions through predictive technologies, automated decision-making, surveillance infrastructures, and data-driven governance. Women become subjects of continuous observation, evaluation, and correction, often without recognizing the ideological assumptions embedded within technological systems.

This concept intersects closely with Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern societies increasingly regulate individuals through surveillance rather than direct violence. The metaphor of the Panopticon demonstrates how the possibility of constant observation encourages self-discipline and behavioural conformity. Chan's fictional institution closely resembles this panoptic structure. Mothers internalize institutional expectations because they know they are perpetually monitored through cameras, artificial intelligence, behavioural assessments, and robotic simulations. Surveillance therefore becomes psychological as well as technological.

The novel also resonates with Shoshana Zuboff's concept of **surveillance capitalism**, which describes how digital technologies transform human behaviour into data that can be monitored, predicted, and manipulated. Although Chan's fictional institution operates under governmental authority rather than commercial corporations, similar mechanisms of data extraction and behavioural prediction structure maternal evaluation. Motherhood becomes

quantifiable through performance metrics rather than understood as a complex emotional relationship between parent and child.

Feminist scholars have long argued that motherhood occupies a contradictory position within patriarchal societies. Women are idealized as caregivers while simultaneously subjected to unrealistic expectations regarding emotional labour, self-sacrifice, and domestic responsibility. Adrienne Rich distinguished between motherhood as a personal experience and motherhood as an institution that regulates women's lives through social expectations. Chan develops this distinction further by imagining how technological governance intensifies institutional motherhood. Artificial intelligence transforms caregiving into measurable performance, thereby reducing maternal identity to algorithmic calculations.

The novel additionally raises important questions regarding racial identity, immigration, and class. Frida Liu's experiences cannot be understood exclusively through gender because her identity as a Chinese American woman shapes institutional perceptions of her maternal competence. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality therefore provides another essential framework for understanding how multiple systems of inequality converge within digital governance. Algorithmic systems frequently reproduce biases relating not only to gender but also to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status because they rely upon historically unequal datasets and institutional assumptions.

Donna Haraway's cyberfeminism further illuminates Chan's representation of artificial intelligence. Haraway challenged simplistic oppositions between humans and machines by arguing that technological systems possess both emancipatory and oppressive possibilities. *The School for Good Mothers* reflects this ambiguity. Technology itself is not inherently oppressive; rather, oppression emerges through the patriarchal institutions that design, implement, and legitimize technological governance. Robotic children, surveillance devices, and behavioural algorithms become extensions of institutional authority rather than autonomous sources of violence.

This paper argues that *The School for Good Mothers* critiques the emergence of algorithmic patriarchy by demonstrating how digital surveillance transforms motherhood into a regulated performance governed through artificial intelligence and institutional power. The study employs feminist literary criticism, surveillance theory, cyberfeminism, and algorithmic ethics to analyse how Chan exposes the hidden ideological assumptions embedded within contemporary technologies. Ultimately, the novel warns that societies increasingly dependent upon algorithmic governance risk replacing human empathy with technological discipline, thereby intensifying rather than dismantling patriarchal control over women's lives.

Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) has rapidly emerged as a significant text within contemporary feminist dystopian fiction, attracting scholarly attention for its incisive critique of motherhood, surveillance, state intervention, and digital governance. Although the novel has not yet generated the extensive body of criticism available for canonical feminist dystopias such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, existing scholarship consistently recognizes it as a powerful reflection on the technological regulation of women's reproductive lives. Critics generally agree that Chan's narrative transcends the conventional "bad mother" trope by exposing the institutional and ideological mechanisms that construct maternal inadequacy. Nevertheless, there remains a noticeable gap in

scholarship concerning the relationship between algorithmic governance, artificial intelligence, and patriarchal power. Most studies focus on motherhood or surveillance independently rather than examining how computational technologies reinforce gendered systems of control. This paper addresses that gap by proposing the concept of **algorithmic patriarchy** as an interpretative framework for understanding the novel.

Early criticism primarily situates *The School for Good Mothers* within the tradition of feminist dystopian literature. Reviewers have observed that Chan reimagines dystopia not through catastrophic political revolutions but through the gradual normalization of bureaucratic intervention into domestic life. Unlike earlier dystopian texts in which authoritarian governments openly suppress women's rights, Chan presents an ostensibly benevolent welfare system that justifies surveillance in the name of child protection. Such a narrative reflects contemporary anxieties surrounding state paternalism, social welfare policies, and the expansion of predictive technologies into intimate family relationships. The dystopian setting thus derives its power from its resemblance to existing institutional practices rather than from speculative fantasy.

Scholars examining motherhood in the novel emphasize the unrealistic standards imposed upon mothers in neoliberal societies. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as personal experience and motherhood as patriarchal institution remains foundational in these discussions. Rich argues that patriarchal societies transform motherhood into a mechanism of social regulation by imposing impossible ideals of maternal perfection while denying women structural support. Chan's novel illustrates precisely this contradiction. Frida Liu's single parenting, emotional exhaustion, and economic pressures receive little institutional recognition; instead, her momentary mistake becomes evidence of permanent maternal failure. Existing criticism therefore interprets the novel as exposing how contemporary motherhood is shaped less by caregiving than by continuous evaluation according to socially constructed ideals.

Several scholars have further argued that Chan's representation of motherhood reflects the logic of neoliberalism. Under neoliberal governance, individuals are expected to assume complete responsibility for structural inequalities, transforming social problems into personal failures. Mothers become entrepreneurs of childcare, responsible for optimizing every aspect of children's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Consequently, maternal identity is increasingly measured through productivity, efficiency, and self-management rather than emotional connection. Chan's fictional school institutionalizes this neoliberal ideology by reducing caregiving to measurable competencies that can supposedly be improved through behavioral training and surveillance.

Recent discussions also emphasize the racial dimensions of maternal surveillance in the novel. Frida Liu's identity as a Chinese American mother complicates conventional narratives of maternal failure because her experiences intersect with racialized expectations surrounding parenting, assimilation, and citizenship. Feminist scholars working within intersectionality, particularly following Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework, argue that gender cannot be separated from race, class, or ethnicity when analyzing institutional discrimination. Chan demonstrates that surveillance disproportionately targets marginalized mothers whose caregiving practices deviate from dominant cultural norms. Maternal competence is therefore

evaluated through standards deeply embedded in racial and class privilege rather than universal definitions of child welfare.

The novel has likewise attracted attention within surveillance studies. Scholars increasingly recognize that digital technologies have transformed surveillance from occasional observation into continuous data extraction. Surveillance is no longer confined to prisons or governmental institutions but extends into schools, workplaces, hospitals, social media platforms, and domestic spaces. Chan portrays this transformation through an institutional environment where cameras, behavioral assessments, psychological evaluations, and robotic children continuously record maternal behavior. Critics note that surveillance in the novel operates less through physical coercion than through psychological internalization. Mothers gradually modify their behavior because they know they are constantly being observed, demonstrating the effectiveness of disciplinary power.

Despite these valuable contributions, much of the existing scholarship conceptualizes surveillance primarily as institutional monitoring rather than algorithmic governance. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and automated decision-making transform patriarchal authority into computational systems. Contemporary societies increasingly rely upon algorithms to evaluate welfare eligibility, predict child neglect, assess educational performance, and guide judicial decisions. These technologies often appear objective because they rely upon mathematical models, yet numerous scholars demonstrate that algorithmic systems inherit biases embedded within historical data. Consequently, technological neutrality frequently masks structural inequalities.

Safiya Umoja Noble's research on algorithmic bias illustrates that search engines and computational systems reproduce gendered and racialized stereotypes while presenting themselves as impartial technologies. Similarly, Virginia Eubanks demonstrates that automated welfare systems disproportionately target economically disadvantaged populations through predictive risk assessments. Although these scholars rarely discuss motherhood directly, their work provides essential insights for interpreting Chan's novel. *The School for Good Mothers* extends precisely these contemporary developments by imagining a society where maternal competence itself becomes subject to algorithmic evaluation. The novel therefore participates in broader debates concerning digital inequality, artificial intelligence, and computational governance.

Another significant gap concerns the emotional consequences of algorithmic surveillance. Existing criticism frequently discusses institutional discipline but rarely examines how computational monitoring reshapes maternal subjectivity. Chan depicts mothers who gradually internalize algorithmic standards, evaluating themselves according to institutional metrics rather than personal judgment. Shame, anxiety, guilt, and self-surveillance become central psychological mechanisms through which algorithmic governance operates. This dimension of emotional discipline requires closer theoretical engagement with feminist surveillance studies.

Accordingly, this paper synthesizes insights from feminist theory, surveillance studies, and digital media scholarship to argue that *The School for Good Mothers* illustrates the emergence of **algorithmic patriarchy**, a system in which patriarchal ideology is reproduced

through algorithmic infrastructures rather than exclusively through legal or cultural institutions. Such an approach extends existing scholarship by connecting motherhood studies with critical algorithm studies, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of Chan's dystopian vision.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining feminist theory, surveillance studies, digital media criticism, and critical algorithm studies. Rather than relying upon a single theoretical perspective, the analysis demonstrates how patriarchal power increasingly operates through interconnected technological, institutional, and ideological mechanisms. Four theoretical perspectives are particularly significant: Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, Safiya Umoja Noble's critique of algorithmic bias, and Adrienne Rich's feminist theory of motherhood.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* provides the foundational framework for understanding surveillance as a mechanism of modern power. Foucault argues that contemporary institutions exercise authority not primarily through physical punishment but through continuous observation that encourages individuals to regulate their own behavior. His discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon demonstrates how the possibility of constant surveillance produces self-discipline even when direct observation is absent. Individuals internalize institutional expectations because they never know precisely when they are being watched. Consequently, power becomes productive rather than merely repressive, shaping identities, habits, and modes of conduct.

Chan's School for Good Mothers represents a twenty-first-century transformation of Foucauldian discipline. Instead of prison guards occupying observation towers, artificial intelligence systems, surveillance cameras, psychological assessments, and robotic simulations perform the work of continuous monitoring. Surveillance becomes automated, data-driven, and omnipresent. Mothers are evaluated not only according to visible actions but also according to emotional expressions, speech patterns, behavioral consistency, and caregiving routines. The novel therefore illustrates what may be described as a **digital Panopticon**, where algorithmic observation replaces direct human supervision while producing similar processes of self-regulation.

While Foucault explains disciplinary surveillance, Shoshana Zuboff's theory of **surveillance capitalism** illuminates the economic logic underlying contemporary data collection. Zuboff argues that digital capitalism converts human experiences into behavioral data that can be analyzed, predicted, and monetized. Individuals become sources of continuous information whose actions are recorded to shape future behavior. Although Zuboff primarily examines corporate technologies such as search engines and social media platforms, her theory is equally relevant to state institutions employing predictive analytics. In Chan's novel, motherhood itself becomes behavioral data. Every interaction between mother and child is quantified, archived, evaluated, and compared against institutional norms. Maternal affection, patience, discipline, and emotional responses become measurable variables within bureaucratic systems of governance.

Safiya Umoja Noble's concept of **algorithmic oppression** further strengthens this framework by challenging assumptions regarding technological neutrality. Noble demonstrates that

algorithms reflect the social values embedded within their design rather than functioning as objective computational mechanisms. Search engines, recommendation systems, and predictive models often reinforce racial and gender hierarchies because they rely upon historically biased datasets. Consequently, algorithmic decision-making reproduces existing inequalities while concealing discrimination beneath claims of scientific objectivity. Chan's novel similarly reveals that technologies assessing maternal competence privilege culturally specific ideals of motherhood while marginalizing mothers whose lives diverge from normative expectations. Algorithmic evaluation therefore becomes an extension of patriarchal ideology rather than an alternative to it.

Adrienne Rich's feminist distinction between the **institution of motherhood** and the **experience of mothering** provides the gendered foundation for this analysis. Rich argues that while mothering may represent intimacy, creativity, and emotional fulfillment, institutional motherhood functions as a patriarchal structure that disciplines women through rigid expectations of self-sacrifice and perfection. Chan's narrative illustrates this distinction with remarkable clarity. Frida's relationship with Harriet reflects genuine maternal affection despite occasional mistakes, whereas the School evaluates her exclusively according to bureaucratic performance indicators. Institutional motherhood consequently erases emotional complexity in favor of standardized behavioral norms.

This study also incorporates insights from intersectional feminism, particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that gender intersects with race, class, and ethnicity in shaping systems of oppression. Frida's experiences cannot be understood solely through gender because her racial identity influences institutional perceptions of maternal competence. Surveillance therefore operates unevenly, disproportionately affecting women situated at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalization.

Drawing these theoretical perspectives together, this paper conceptualizes **algorithmic patriarchy** as a contemporary form of gendered power in which patriarchal norms are encoded within algorithmic systems, surveillance infrastructures, and predictive technologies. Unlike traditional patriarchal institutions that relied primarily upon visible legal authority or religious doctrine, algorithmic patriarchy derives legitimacy from claims of technological objectivity, scientific precision, and data-driven governance. It transforms motherhood into a continuously monitored performance while obscuring political power behind computational processes. This framework provides the conceptual foundation for the following analysis, which demonstrates how *The School for Good Mothers* critiques the convergence of surveillance technologies and patriarchal governance in the digital age.

Conclusion

Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* presents a disturbing yet plausible vision of a society in which technological innovation legitimizes new forms of patriarchal control. Rather than depicting surveillance as an extraordinary feature of a totalitarian regime, Chan illustrates how algorithmic governance gradually infiltrates ordinary family life through institutions that claim to protect children and promote responsible parenting. The novel demonstrates that digital technologies are never politically neutral; instead, they reflect and reproduce the social values embedded within their design. Consequently, artificial

intelligence, predictive analytics, and behavioural monitoring become instruments through which motherhood is regulated, evaluated, and disciplined.

This paper has argued that Chan's dystopian narrative is best understood through the concept of **algorithmic patriarchy**, a contemporary system in which patriarchal authority operates through computational infrastructures rather than solely through legal, religious, or cultural institutions. Unlike traditional forms of patriarchal domination, algorithmic patriarchy derives legitimacy from the rhetoric of scientific objectivity, technological efficiency, and data-driven governance. Mothers are not merely expected to care for their children; they are required to perform motherhood according to standardized behavioural metrics established by institutional algorithms. Such systems redefine caregiving as a measurable performance while obscuring the ideological assumptions underlying technological evaluation.

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, this study demonstrated that the School functions as a digital Panopticon in which continuous surveillance produces self-regulating maternal subjects. Observation is no longer limited to human inspectors but is automated through cameras, artificial intelligence, behavioural scoring, and robotic simulations. The result is a form of power that extends beyond physical punishment into psychological discipline, encouraging mothers to internalize institutional expectations and monitor themselves. Surveillance thus becomes productive, shaping identities and emotions rather than merely restricting behaviour.

The analysis further employed Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism to show how motherhood itself becomes transformed into behavioural data. Every interaction between mother and child is recorded, quantified, archived, and evaluated according to institutional norms. Emotional labour, affection, patience, and caregiving are converted into measurable variables that facilitate bureaucratic governance. Chan's novel therefore extends contemporary critiques of data capitalism into the intimate sphere of family life, revealing that human relationships increasingly risk being reduced to algorithmic calculations.

Safiya Umoja Noble's work on algorithmic bias provided another essential perspective by demonstrating that computational systems reproduce historical inequalities while presenting themselves as objective technologies. Chan similarly reveals that algorithmic evaluation privileges culturally dominant ideals of motherhood, disproportionately affecting women situated at the intersections of gender, race, and class. Frida Liu's experiences illustrate that surveillance does not operate equally across society but reinforces existing hierarchies embedded within institutional structures. Technological neutrality consequently becomes a myth that conceals structural discrimination beneath mathematical precision.

Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as lived experience and motherhood as patriarchal institution further illuminated the novel's feminist critique. Chan portrays genuine maternal love as emotionally complex, imperfect, and deeply human, while institutional motherhood demands impossible standards of consistency and self-sacrifice. Algorithms cannot accommodate the ambiguity inherent in caregiving because computational systems require standardized behavioural models. The novel therefore exposes the incompatibility between authentic human relationships and algorithmic governance.

At a broader level, *The School for Good Mothers* contributes significantly to contemporary feminist dystopian literature by shifting attention from reproductive control to digital surveillance. Whereas earlier feminist dystopias frequently explored the regulation of women's bodies through legal or religious authority, Chan demonstrates that twenty-first-century power increasingly operates through data collection, behavioural prediction, and artificial intelligence. Her dystopia reflects current developments in predictive policing, automated welfare systems, facial recognition technologies, and digital risk assessment, making the novel particularly relevant to ongoing debates surrounding algorithmic governance and artificial intelligence ethics.

Importantly, Chan does not reject technology itself. Instead, she critiques the institutional and ideological conditions under which technological systems are designed and implemented. Algorithms become oppressive not because they are inherently malicious but because they encode patriarchal assumptions regarding gender, family, and caregiving. The novel therefore calls for ethical frameworks capable of ensuring that technological innovation promotes justice rather than reproducing historical inequalities.

Ultimately, *The School for Good Mothers* serves as both literary warning and political intervention. It urges readers to question the growing reliance upon algorithmic decision-making in areas requiring empathy, contextual understanding, and human judgment. Motherhood, Chan suggests, cannot be reduced to behavioural metrics, predictive models, or computational evaluations because caregiving fundamentally depends upon emotional complexity that exceeds algorithmic calculation. By exposing the convergence of surveillance technologies and patriarchal governance, the novel reminds us that protecting democratic freedoms requires not only regulating artificial intelligence but also challenging the social ideologies encoded within technological systems.

Future scholarship may further explore the intersections of digital feminism, reproductive justice, artificial intelligence ethics, and literary dystopia, examining how contemporary fiction anticipates the political and ethical dilemmas emerging from increasingly automated societies. Chan's novel remains an essential contribution to these debates, encouraging readers to reconsider the relationship between technology, gender, and power in the digital age.

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