The Mother, the Other and the Posthuman: Speculating Motherhood as a Posthuman Condition through Jessamine Chan's The School for Good Mothers

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Abstract

The contemporary anthropocene, with its scientific breakthroughs in fertility treatments and increasingly regressive stance on female reproductive rights, along with escalating violence against women all over the world, is an intriguing time for women and mothers alike. The modern woman, often raised witnessing traditional gender roles while simultaneously growing up with the teachings of feminism and women empowerment, finds herself at the crossroads more often than not.

This particular paper aims to investigate the nuances attached to the idea of motherhood as propagated by the existing society, with the aid of theories of posthumanism and feminism, among others in Jessamine Chan's debut novel *The School for Good Mothers (*2022). Through a close reading of this novel, this paper aims to elaborate the condition of modern mothers in the society and tries to define motherhood. Furthermore, it will attempt to understand motherhood in the context of dystopia, and speculate whether the idea of motherhood can be established as a posthuman condition.

Keywords: Speculative fiction, motherhood, posthumanism, feminism, dystopia

Introduction

The roots of this paper are embedded in the following ideas – first, that of the age-old debate surrounding the idea of woman as the gendered other, pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex (*1949), and of "posthumanism as the social discourse (in the Foucauldian sense), which negotiates the pressing question of what it means to be human under the conditions of globalisation" (Herbrechter, 2017, p. 94), the gender movements, climate change and technoscience, to name a few. Additionally, it seems that women's identities as a mother and an individual are increasingly at odds with one another in the modern world, instead of being different facets of one entity. In her book *Forget Having It All*

(2018), journalist Amy Westervelt mentions that "We still ask mothers to parent as though they don't work and work as though they don't parent." (p. 220) Moreover, incidents such as the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, a landmark 1973 judgement[1] by the Supreme Court in the US which made abortion a constitutional right, and subsequent implementation of stringent anti-abortion laws by many states in the country, or the tremendously exclusionary surrogacy and IVF laws implemented in India in the last few years[2], only speak of society's increasing intention to impose upon a woman's right to and choice of reproduction.

Considering the conflict between the ideas of personal identity and motherhood, and taking cognisance of the fact that a female's identity is often deeply intertwined and overshadowed by the physicality and feasibility of her body, like that of the handmaids from Margaret Atwood's famous 1985 novel, this paper hypothesizes that women get pushed into the realm of posthuman. This paper aims to investigate the nuances attached to the idea of motherhood as propagated by the existing society and speculates motherhood to be a posthuman condition, with the aid of contemporary theories such as posthumanism and feminism, through a critical study of Jessamine Chan's debut novel *The School for good Mothers* (2022).

The School for Good Mothers

The School for Good Mothers (2022) tells the story of Frida Liu, an American Chinese single mother who shares the custody of her toddler daughter with a white ex-husband. Frida, clearly suffering from postpartum repercussions, leaves her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter alone at home one day for a few hours, only to come back and find that police and child protective services have been called by her neighbours. In the aftermath, her daughter Harriet is taken from her custody and placed full-time with her ex-husband Gust and his much younger white girlfriend Susan-

[1] Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) was overturned in 2022 by the US Supreme Court, which led to 13 states in US making abortion severely restrictive.

[2] The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021, and the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act, 2021, prohibits commercial surrogacy and also stipulates age and gender restrictions on people availing ART.

na. Meanwhile Frida is taken for a ride through the American legal system to regain her parental rights. She is first put under surveillance in her own home. Her every move is recorded and put under inspection – from her online activity to her behaviour and body language at home to her phone conversations, in order to determine her suitability to mother her daughter. Eventually, she gets a court date, and at her lawyer's behest Frida is hopeful that "worst case scenario is more supervised visits. But the judge is likely to approve unsupervised visits, overnight visits. Joint custody" (Chan, 2022, p. 64).

However, things do not go Frida's way, and she loses custody of her daughter. In the court she is told that "In order to get Harriet back, Frida must learn to be a better mother" (Chan, 2022, p. 70). She is informed of a redeeming opportunity during the court hearing, "to participate in a new rehabilitation program," where she is to "undergo a year of instruction and training. At a live-in facility. With women like yourself." (Chan, 2022, p. 69) There, "she must demonstrate her capacity for genuine maternal feeling and attachment, hone her maternal instincts, show she can be trusted. Next November, the state will decide if she's made sufficient progress. If she hasn't, her parental rights will be terminated" (Chan, 2022, p.70). Although "The judge said it was her choice.", there was hardly any choice to be had if Frida wanted her daughter back. However, she is assured by the judge that, "We're going to fix you, Ms. Liu."(Chan, 2022, p. 69) Thus, Frida embarks on a journey to the school for bad mothers, to learn to be good.

Good and bad mothers in history and mythology

The "archetype of the Great Mother, is established in the human psyche, which is often found in the figures of the Great Goddess represented in the myths and artistic creations across the world" (Neumann, 2015, p. 3). From mythological and religious characters such as the *Mahabharata*'s Kunti, who embraced her sister-wife's children as her own or Virgin Mary from the *Bible* who conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit, to fictional characters such as Margaret "Mammy" March from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and even more recent Molly Weasley from the *Harry Potter* Books, good mothers are a given part and parcel of an upstanding society. Per Neumann (2015), the idea that com-

bines "mother" and "great" is coloured emotionally rather than a putting together of simple concepts (p. 4). Good mothers give birth to great children, and are marked by their tremendous sacrifice to support their children. Furthermore, good mothers are to be mothers above all else. The society brings in the idea of feminine mystique, which "permits… women to ignore the question of their identity" (p. 53), and answers their question about their identity by highlighting their status as mother and wife (Friedan, 2010).

Adrienne Rich, in her *Of Woman Born* (1976), mentions that "Patriarchy would seem to require, then, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species, but that a majority of that species- women- shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened" (p. 43).

Along with the good mothers from history and mythology, so called bad mothers have also been abundant across the world. From fictional characters like Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana* and Medea from the Greek myths to real, contemporary figures such as Ruby Franke, an American mom vlogger booked for endangering and abusing her children, similar women are antithetical to the good mothers who demonstrate the four basic qualities of womanhood – namely, piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness per Barbara Welter (1966) (as cited in Kaplan, 1992, p. 24).

They are women who prioritize and nurture other identities and ambitions beyond that of devoted motherhood. Frida, the protagonist of the novel in consideration, is repeatedly chided by both her conscience and the society, for feeling romantic or sexual urges towards men, instead of focusing single-mindedly on being a mother. Many of the other mothers in the school for bad mothers, Roxanne, Meryl, Margaret etc., are accused of the crimes like seeking bodily pleasure, romance and so on, beyond their offences regarding their children.

Frida the bad mother

Frida is a bad mother, who "neglected and abandoned her child. She has no other identity" (Chan, 2022, p.73). This sentiment is reinforced repeatedly at her new school. One of the first and oft repeated teachings at the school goes like this – "I am a bad mother, but I am learning to be good" (Chan, 2022, p.76). Kaplan (1992) highlights that "Motherhood

discourses quickly arose in North America to educate the new mother. An array of so-called authorities – priests and clergymen, doctors, philosophers, professors, writers, journalists, and others, all largely male – were constantly proclaiming about mothering in the nineteenth century; they took it upon themselves to define for mothers what their role should be" (p. 21). Frida and the other mothers in the school fail to meet the standard the patriarchs of the society have set for them.

Frida and the other pupils at the school are shown "charts that demonstrate the link between bad parenting and juvenile delinquency, bad parenting and school shooters, bad parenting and teen pregnancy, bad parenting and terrorism, not to mention high school and college graduation rates, not to mention expected earnings" (Chan, 2022, p.76) to highlight how them being bad mothers affect their children's lives and society at large. Doyle (2019) discusses how the bad mother, who is "the familiar and terrible vision of a woman corrupting the world" unleashes "her own flaws upon it through her monstrous children" (p.188).

The mother pupils are told that they are the lucky ones, having gotten the unique opportunity to train in one of the first training centres that are "being developed all over the country" since just "a few months ago, they would have been sent to parenting classes. They would have studied an outdated manual. But what good is learning about parenting in the abstract?" (Chan, 2022, p. 76) Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* notes that "factory, monastery, school, hospitals" act as "'enclosures' inside which the bodies are 'distributed in space'" (1979, p. 307). Such enclosures work through a mechanism of power, which is the "disciplinary gaze" that makes every person under its scrutiny interiorising the "gaze" to such an extent that eventually the individual becomes their own overseer (Foucault, 1979).

The school gives each of the mothers a fake child, an automated doll that they are supposed to raise during their stay in the school, and teach them values and ethics as well as life skills, such as "stranger-danger", of being human. The mothers are scored based on their performance in being the perfect mother to their respective fake child. Depending on their scores, they get talking privileges with their actual children, and get assessment of whether their chances of getting their children back is fair or good or bad. Bad performances get their talking privileges taken away and they get sent to talk circles, which however gets added as a negative mark in their files (Chan, 2022).

In Frida's world, the government has taken the decision to transform bad parents from inside out, since they believe that to "fix the home" is to "fix society." The bad parents would get the "right instincts, the right feelings, the ability to make split-second, safe, nurturing, loving decisions" (Chan, 2022, p. 76) and many other necessary attributes getting drilled into them in the year long program. Foucault, while presenting the idea of "docile bodies," argues that the physical body can be subjected, used, transformed and improved by those in power for their benefit (p. 136).

In this school Frida, a woman with degrees from Ivy league colleges and a career, is taught that "what they really need is a partner who earns the money" (Chan, 2022, p. 214). She notices that the women are essentially "being trained to be stay-at-home mothers" (Chan, 2022, p. 214). However, she wonders where the money to run the household is supposed to come from, given the "instructors have never mentioned jobs outside the home or day care or babysitters" (Chan, 2022, p. 216). Kaplan (1992) notes that "Women's entry into the work-force in large numbers during the First World War, the women's suffrage movement, and the first waves of female liberation in the 1920s, all severely threatened the nuclear family, whose cornerstone was the modern mother" (p. 18).

Yet, when Frida meets Tucker, a "bad father" whose son fell and broke his arm while in his watch, she finds out that the standards to which fathers are held responsible is very different than those for the mothers. The fathers aren't subjected to their talking privilege being taken away. Neither are they provided with talking points to use with their children and their caregivers, a convention that the mothers are forced to adhere to strictly. Frida, despite performing well for weeks, gets her talking privilege taken away when a few mothers she was close with escape, while Tucker remains completely certain about his chances of getting his son back (Chan, 2022).

(Bad)motherhood and posthumanism

In an article, Kate Maddalena states that "motherhood is a posthuman predicament" and mentions that as a mother she is "well-equipped to see how ill-equipped I am" (Maddalena, 2021). This is a feeling Frida experiences repeatedly, both while mothering Harriet, her daughter, and trying to be the perfect mother to Emmanuelle, the doll.

Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has shown how Offred, the

protagonist stripped of any personal identifier, was reduced to her womb along with the other handmaids of the story. Similarly in *The Lesson* (2015), Sowmya Rajendran recounts how the most useful device in the arsenal of the moral police force was a baby box in keeping errant women who want out of marriages or don't want to marry in check.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) further mentions that human body was being explored, broken down, and rearranged by the machinery of power, which allowed one to have a hold over others' bodies. Similarly, Donna Haraway (1991) also suggests the same about the ontological condition of the mechanised body that Foucault describes in relation to modern industrial society. She recognises the fact that cyborg ontology is a product of surveillance, security and militarism and the conflict between capitalism and socialism (p. 151). Transhumanist Chris Gray (2001) notes that while the post-structuralist cyborgization of the human has the possibility of either empowering the democratic politics of the self, it also can create the possibility for a greater oppression as technology modulates social discourse under the simulation of free will. Deleuze (1995) calls a similar self "Dividual" who is fragmentary, always in development, always a potential mould for the market to transform, distribute and train. Molly Young (2022) in her review Chan's book for The New York Times notes that "Frida's status as a mother in training happens largely due to the fact, that she has committed a sin not of parenting but of ontology: in conceiving of herself as a daughter, lover, employee and citizen rather than mother alone, she has violated a new code of maternal ethics. The corrective action she must take, then, is to slaughter all superfluous selves." The only identity of Frida's that is allowed to survive is that a mother, which is also at the mercy of the system. While mothering both Harriet, and Emmanuelle, Frida's motherhood is repeatedly questioned and in the end, her motherhood is terminated with regards to both her daughters.

In his article "In defence of posthuman dignity", Nick Bostrom (2005) argues that "human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods" (p. 202). Bostrom highlights the worry that eminent bio-conservative writers such as Leon Kass, Francis Fukuyama, and so on are concerned with, which is that human enhancement technologies might be actually "dehumanizing" (p. 203). He further argues that the central concern is that "these technologies might undermine our human dignity or inadvertently erode something that is deeply valuable

about being human but that is difficult to put into words or to factor into a cost-benefit analysis" (Bostrom, 2005, p. 203).The bioconservatives, according to him, opined that allowing human enhancement would only lead to a "slippery slope towards an ultimately debased, posthuman state' (Bostrom, 2005, p. 204). In Chan's book, some of Frida's school mates eventually kill themselves, upon realizing that not only can they never live up to the unrealistic expectations of the system, but they also have little to no actual chances of getting their children back (Chan, 2022). Doyle (2019) notes that in the real world, "Women are meant to completely efface themselves in motherhood; to live for, and in, and through their children", yet "mothers are endlessly blamed for any and every bad decision made by their children" (p. 190).

Bostrom (2005) also mentions that transhumanists consider "human and posthuman dignity" to be "compatible and complementary. They insist that dignity, in its modern sense, consists in what we are and what we have the potential to become, not in our pedigree or our causal origin" (p. 213). Frida and the fellow mothers are denied this dignity in the school, where they are relegated as simply "bad mothers" (Chan, 2022).

In their essay "Toward a Posthuman Education", Snaza et al. (2014) mention that much of critical "Posthumanism allies itself with the politico-pedagogical projects of feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, and queer activism as it confronts the systematic dehumanization of people under the hegemonic Western form of political right" (p. 49). However, they warn that dehumanization is a perpetual possibility, both virtually or structurally, as the state and "non-state actors on the global stage" can "declare some of us "inhuman" or less than human" with increasing ease (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 49). They proclaim that patriarchy has achieved "analogous forms of dehumanization of women" by turning women "into "objects" of trade, desire, and consumption" and they argue that such violence is made possible by "dehumanization"(Snaza et al., 2014, p. 48).

Conclusion

The school for bad mothers is full of single mothers, women of colour and women from low-income background, and rife with latent racism and class-based bias. The state sponsored school and its curriculum reflect that the current ethics of humanity which are in practice are not

conducive for women to be mothers and humans – it is a world set up for their failure. This is seen repeatedly in the case of Frida and the other bad mothers in her school. The women are put in positions and situations that are designed for them to fail and impossible to succeed in. Not only their actions but their emotions are also repeatedly reprimanded for either being too much or for not being enough or even simply for not aligning with the goal of being a "good mother." When Frida is accused of forming a romantic relationship with Tucker, and she claims that she didn't kiss him or cross a line, the counselor counters that by saying "But you wanted to" (Chan, 2022, p. 262).

Doyle (2019) notes, "the bad mother is patriarchy's saving throw, its ultimate loophole: by moving the blame…it makes guilty parties out of the women who are its victims," (p. 191) echoing Haraway (2008) who has argued that in the entrails of humanism all the others are reduced to the type situated opposite the rational man. In the end, Frida realizes that she "was not the mother she was before, not the mother she became, but a mother from a manual, blank and interchangeable" (Chan, 2022, p. 268), even as her legal rights as Harriet's mother was terminated by the court. Frida is reduced to just a biological mother by the system and state, where her biology overtakes her motherhood.

Eventually, Frida embraces her status as the other while asserting her identity as a mother, "I am your mother. I'll always be your mother," (Chan, 2022, p. 271) by running away with her daughter, an act unthinkable for a mother as per norms. She forsakes the options that await her, while knowing the consequences of her short-lived bout of happiness from being with her daughter. She chooses to leave the societal bounds and labels prescribed for her as a woman and a mother, and decides Harriet would learn a different story about her – not the one prescribed and narrated by the state and the system, rather she'd one day tell Harriet about the mother she was (Chan, 2022, p. 286).

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