



The Impacts of Hustle Culture on Motherhood in Jessmine Chan's "*The School For Good Mothers*"

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of hustle culture in the portrayal of the mother figure in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*. The novel depicts a dystopian society in which motherhood is strictly monitored and evaluated through state-imposed standards of perfection. By analyzing the main character, Frida Liu, this research explores how the ideals of productivity, self-discipline, and constant performance core values of hustle culture are internalized within the realm of motherhood. Using a cultural and feminist literary approach, the study reveals that Chan's narrative portrays motherhood as a form of labor shaped by neoliberal expectations of efficiency and moral excellence. The mother figure becomes both the subject and victim of a system that equates maternal worth with productivity and compliance. Ultimately, the novel exposes the dehumanizing impact of hustle culture on maternal identity, illustrating how the pursuit of the "good mother" ideal erases emotional authenticity and individual agency. Through this portrayal, *The School for Good Mothers* critiques contemporary society's obsession with productivity and perfection, particularly as it pertains to women's roles in both public and private spheres.

Key words: Hustle culture, motherhood, neoliberalism, feminist

A. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between societal expectations and individual identity has become increasingly complex in contemporary contexts, particularly regarding motherhood. In Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*, the narrative unfolds within a dystopian framework where motherhood is subjected to rigorous scrutiny and evaluation based on state-imposed standards of perfection. This environment reflects the pervasive influence of hustle culture, which prioritizes productivity, self-discipline, and constant performance as essential

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qualities of a "good mother." Through the character of Frida Liu, the novel illustrates how these ideals are internalized, leading to a profound impact on maternal identity and emotional well-being.

While affecting people of all genders and social classes, hustle culture has a much greater impact on women, especially mothers. According to Petersen (2020, pp.93–132), women suffer from structural burnout, which she describes as systemic fatigue brought on by the pressure to perform flawlessly in both the home and professional spheres. This situation is often referred to as the 'double job' phenomenon, whereby mothers are expected to manage their private and public obligations simultaneously. They must provide emotional and domestic care at home while also being productive at work. The continuous physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion caused by this dual burden is indicative of a wider pattern of gender inequality ingrained in capitalist society.

The rise of hustle culture is profoundly ingrained in the broader neoliberalism concept. According to Harvey (2005) and Brown (2015), neoliberalism is an economic and political system based on market competitiveness, self-reliance, and individual responsibility as the primary governing principles of society. Under neoliberal rationalism, citizens are no longer viewed as members of a communal community but rather as self-managing individuals accountable for their own success and failure. Social assistance, care, and support are becoming more privatized, shifting responsibilities from the state to the person.

In this neoliberal framework, hustle culture is a cultural expression of market logic. It applies economic principles such as efficiency, productivity, and performance to the most personal aspects of life, such as family, relationships, and motherhood. People are supposed to think of themselves as entrepreneurs, continuously improving and maximizing every element of their lives. For mothers, this mindset leads to what authors like Gill and Orgad (2018) refer to as "neoliberal motherhood," in which women are expected to flawlessly balance household, emotional, and professional tasks while accepting full responsibility for any failings. As a result, failure to fulfill these unrealistic standards is internalized as personal guilt rather than being recognized as a product of institutional inequity.

Thus, neoliberalism maintains and legitimizes hustle culture by portraying overwork as empowerment and self-discipline as a moral virtue. In this sense, motherhood is not just a social and emotional duty but also a production site, with care, tenderness, and responsibility viewed as forms of invisible labor. This ideological framework helps to explain why many working mothers experience chronic weariness, shame, and self-blame, which Petersen (2020) cites as features of burnout culture.

In addition to being a fictional concept, the double-job phenomenon is a social reality that reflects the experiences of many working mothers in the US. A 2023 study from the U.S. Department of Labor states that about 40% of American mothers who have children under the age of 18 are the family's main provider and that more than 70% of them are workers. Nevertheless, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of the household and childcare duties.

According to Pew Research Center surveys from 2022, working mothers devote over 65% more time to childcare and housework than working males. This disparity demonstrates how, despite an increase in women's employment, social structures nonetheless uphold traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, the American workplace often portrays the concept of the 'perfect employee' as someone who is always available, productive, and emotionally stable. These qualities are difficult for mothers to uphold due to their other responsibilities. Without adequate institutional support, such as flexible working hours, parental leave, and affordable childcare, many mothers feel guilty, exhausted, and blamed for failing to live up to social norms. This aligns with Petersen's theory of burnout culture, which views personal failure as an individual's responsibility rather than a systemic problem and which moralizes tiredness.

From a literary perspective, modern feminist fiction has traditionally focused heavily on the character of the working mother. Numerous contemporary American novels examine the conflict between individual aspirations, mother responsibilities, and social condemnation. Authors like Morrison, Plath, and Shriver have illustrated how cultural norms that frequently call for emotional and selfless sacrifice affect motherhood. "The School for Good Mothers" (2022) by Jessamine Chan carries on this tradition by exposing the unattainable expectations placed on mothers in a neoliberal society through a combination of feminist realism and dystopian critique.

One of the key aspects of Chan's book that highlights the ethical and emotional inconsistencies of contemporary parenthood is the dual role of parents. Pages 5–9 depict Frida Liu's struggles to balance childcare with her professional work: "Frida had been up since 5 a.m., replying to emails while feeding Harriet oatmeal. There was no time to ponder or breathe (p.6). Chan illustrates Frida's tiredness as she tries to finish office reports after putting her daughter to bed on pages 10–14 "She tried to finish a report after putting Harriet to bed, her eyes stinging from exhaustion" (p.12).

Additionally, the author highlights the unrealistic expectations society imposed on her on pages 37–43: "Her boss expected perfection. Her daughter expected her full attention. The world expected both"(p.39). These instances highlight the actual challenges faced by American working mothers who must excel in all areas.

The way hustle culture is reflected in women's day-to-day activities is supported by this double job. Women are expected to be perfect mothers and workers at the same time, leaving little time for relaxation or emotional release. In a patriarchal society, women's success is determined by how well they can fulfil both roles, and failure in either area is viewed as a moral deficiency. Thus, hustle culture serves as a social discipline that dictates how women should live, work and raise their children, as well as being an economic philosophy. It turns self-sacrifice, compassion and care into unseen labour that goes unappreciated.

Chan's narrative explores these concepts through a dystopian vision. After making a little error, Frida is taken to a government institution to be retrained as a "good mother," a metaphor for society's expectation that mothers constantly

rectify, improve, and perfect themselves. Frida's professional tasks continue to haunt her even within the institution, as demonstrated on pages 115-121: "Even here, in this place for mothers, she couldn't stop thinking about deadlines, emails, the unfinished work waiting for her" (p. 118). This text reveals how hustle culture spreads beyond the public sphere and into women's private and emotional lives.

Although many scholars have examined *The School for Good Mothers* from feminist and dystopian perspectives, few have analyzed it in terms of hustle culture and the dual-role phenomenon. Most arguments have centered on surveillance, motherhood, and morality but have not addressed the underlying capitalist ideology that equates productivity with virtue. This study therefore aims to address this research gap by examining how hustle culture operates within the novel and its impact on the depiction of modern motherhood in an American context.

This explanation underpins the current study, "The Impact of Hustle Culture on Motherhood in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*." Using Petersen's burnout culture from *Can't Even* (2020), this study will look at how capitalist values centered on overwork, perfectionism, and moral performance shape the emotional and psychological experiences of mothers in the book. Finally, this study contends that hustle culture and the multiple job phenomena change motherhood from a natural and social duty to a never-ending form of labor that undermines women's sense of self and well-being in both literature.

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to explore how hustle culture shapes the representation of motherhood in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*. It aims to examine the ways in which the novel critiques modern parenting expectations, illuminates the psychological effects of performance-driven motherhood, and reflects broader societal tensions between individual agency and structural control. By situating the novel within current theoretical frameworks on neoliberalism, gender, and care, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of literature's role in challenging oppressive ideologies.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a qualitative descriptive design using feminist literary analysis and cultural studies as frameworks. The primary data source is Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2022), while secondary data consist of feminist theory texts, cultural critiques, and journal articles addressing neoliberal motherhood.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

1. Impacts of hustle culture toward character motherhood in the novel *The School for Good Mothers*

a) Psychological Impact

The *School for Good Mothers* by Jessamine Chan portrays motherhood as a subject of ongoing examination and critique in addition to being a personal duty. The novel examines how moms experience extreme emotional strain as a result of pressure from society and outside oversight to perform perfectly. Because of the constant comparison of her choices and behaviors to idealized parenting standards, the protagonist, Frida Liu, personifies this struggle. It is clear how motherhood under surveillance may turn caregiving into a high-stakes task rife with fear and self-reproach since this climate of evaluation creates severe performance anxiety.

“I haven’t been sleeping. I wasn’t thinking. I know that’s no excuse. I thought she’d be ne for an hour. I was just going to go in and come right back.” “Why would you do that? That’s not okay. You’re not raising her alone, you know. You could have called me. Either of us. Susanna could have helped you.” Gust grips her wrists. “She’s coming home with us tonight. Look at me. Are you listening, Frida? This is serious. The cops said you might lose custody.” “No.” She pulls her hands away. The room spins. “Temporarily,” he says. “Sweetie, you’re not breathing.” He shakes her shoulder and tells her to take a breath, but she can’t. If she does, she might vomit. On the other side of the door, she hears crying. “Can I?” Gust nods. (Chan’s 2022, p. 11)

This quotation illustrates Frida's performance anxiety stemming from the internal pressure she feels as a mother. She acknowledges her exhaustion and loss of focus but immediately emphasizes that these are not acceptable excuses. This illustrates how Frida judges herself critically, feeling guilty because every action, no matter how small, could reflect her inadequacy as a mother. The pressure to always be 'perfect' and present for her child creates a constant fear of failure.

This section also emphasizes the contradiction between personal needs and maternal demands. Frida wants to leave her child for a moment, but she feels guilty and terrified of the consequences. Chan utilizes this time to demonstrate how internal expectations and social conventions transform the parenting experience into a place of anxious self-evaluation. Frida's physical and mental tiredness heightens the emotional impact of performance anxiety, leaving her more vulnerable to stress and feelings of failure.

Gust grips her wrists. “She’s coming home with us tonight. Look at me. Are you listening, Frida? This is serious. The cops said you might lose custody.” “No.” She pulls her hands away. The room spins. “Temporarily,” he says. “Sweetie, you’re not breathing.” He shakes her shoulder and tells her to take a breath, but she can’t. If she does, she might vomit. On the other side of the door, she hears crying. “Can I?” Gust nods. Susanna is holding Harriet. She’s given her some apple slices. It always kills Frida to see Harriet’s ease with Susanna, her ease even

now, after a day of illness and fear and strangers. This morning, Frida dressed Harriet in a purple dinosaur T-shirt and striped leggings and moccasins, but now she's in a raggedy pink sweater and jeans that are much too big, socks, but no shoes. (Chan's 2022, p. 12)

The quotation above demonstrates how external pressure exacerbates Frida's anxiety. The danger of losing custody to the authorities causes her great worry, as even a minor error could have a significant impact on her status as a mother. The presence of Gust and the police represents ongoing surveillance, which adds to Frida's psychological burden and emphasizes the need of not making mistakes. This causes Frida to be anxious about every decision she makes as a mother.

Additionally, this external pressure influenced Frida's identity and self-esteem as a mother. Her fear of losing custody causes her to question her abilities and self-esteem. Chan discusses how societal and legal systems encourage women's psychological uneasiness, making parenthood a continuously evaluated 'performance.' Frida is constantly anxious owing to both real and imagined failures; thus, external and internal pressures reinforce each other.

She's seen Will on campus twice, bumped into him once at the bookstore, once at the main food court. She asked him to stop calling, wouldn't let him hug her in public. Her work is slow and scattered. She sometimes shows up at her desk having obviously been crying in the bathroom. Emotion makes her boss uncomfortable. After another round of late articles, her boss rescinds her work-from-home days. He's sorry this will mean less time with Harriet, but the organization must come first. "I don't want to have to speak to HR," her boss says. "It won't happen again. I promise. There have been..." Problems at home, she wants to say. She's thought about looking for another position, has considered quitting, but she needs health insurance. Penn has good benefits. Her father called in favors to help her get this job. (Chan's, 2022, p. 58)

Her performance at work becomes noticeably sluggish and unfocused, which is a clear sign that she is finding it difficult to balance her professional responsibilities with managing her emotional state. Sometimes, she returns to her desk with visible traces of having cried in the bathroom, suggesting that she is overwhelmed by her emotions and unable to contain her distress. Her boss is uneasy about her emotional displays, as such vulnerability disrupts the professional atmosphere he expects in the workplace. After repeatedly submitting her articles late, her boss cancels her work-from-home privileges, significantly limiting her flexibility as a working mother. Although he expresses regret and acknowledges that this change will reduce the time she can spend with Harriet, he ultimately emphasizes that the company's needs and productivity must take

priority over her personal life. This reinforces the prioritization of work over family in a demanding work culture.

This quotation highlights Frida's increasingly unstable emotional state, which is the result of mounting stress and severe mental exhaustion. The pressure she endures, combined with chronic sleep deprivation, significantly diminishes her ability to think rationally or make sound decisions. This later causes her to experience deep regret and acknowledge her mistakes. It also reveals how her psychological state leaves her with a weakened sense of control over her actions and circumstances, making her more vulnerable to self-criticism and emotional turmoil. The passage highlights not only how her inner fatigue affects her judgement but also how it distorts her self-perception, pushing her to internalize blame and guilt for situations largely beyond her control. Overall, it emphasizes the extent to which prolonged emotional strain can erode an individual's resilience, leading to overwhelming self-doubt and feelings of helplessness.

Thus, the above quotation clearly illustrates how Frida's performance anxiety stems from the tension between the high professional expectations placed upon her and the emotional difficulties she is experiencing in her personal life. Her inability to balance these conflicting demands intensifies her emotional distress, gradually eroding her sense of stability and self-assurance. As the pressure to meet workplace standards increases while her personal issues remain unresolved, Frida becomes increasingly overwhelmed. This leads to heightened sadness and a progressive loss of control over her thoughts, emotions, and behavior. This situation highlights how unmet expectations and emotional burdens can interact to create a cycle of anxiety that impairs functioning and diminishes self-worth.

Based on Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014), this concern is a reflection of the cultural expectation that women be flawless in all spheres of life, including emotional, maternal, and professional. Frida's battle symbolizes the psychological fight she has between the systematic pressure to perform flawlessly and her desire to nurture in a real way. Her incapacity to relax or display vulnerability is evidence of how hustling culture has infiltrated emotional life and transformed love into work. According to Petersen (2020), these circumstances lead to burnout and guilt as indicators of moral value, showing how mothers are caught in never-ending cycles of fatigue and self-examination.

b) Social Impacts

An analysis of the depiction of motherhood in the context of hustle culture in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* must consider moments that reflect the pressures and expectations placed on women in the social impact. The following extract shows how the protagonist, Frida Liu, is continually inspected and critiqued, emphasising her internal struggles and the societal norms that define 'good' motherhood. It is a striking example of how hustle culture

exacerbates parental responsibilities while amplifying feelings of guilt, anxiety, and inadequacy.

Frida tugs at her hair, pulling it loose. "My daughter hasn't been sleeping. She's supposed to take two naps a day, and she hasn't been napping at all. I've been sleeping on her oor. She won't fall asleep unless I'm holding her hand. And if I try to leave the room, she wakes up instantly and totally ips out. The past few days have been a blur. I've been overwhelmed. Don't you have days like that? I've been so tired I've had chest pains."

"All parents are tired."

"I intended to come right back."

"But you didn't. You got in your car and drove away. That's abandonment, Ms. Liu. If you want to leave the house whenever you feel like it, you get a dog, not a kid." Frida blinks back tears. She wants to say she's not the same as those bad mothers in the news. She didn't set her house on re. She didn't leave Harriet on a subway platform. She didn't strap Harriet into the back seat and drive into a lake. (Chan's 2022, p. 16)

The quotation highlights the psychological pressure experienced by Frida Liu as a mother in a cultural context that demands perfection or hustle culture. The statement 'All parents are tired' shows Frida's human condition the physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by almost all parents. However, the surveillance system or authority figure in this story rejects this excuse as justification, emphasizing that the standards for parents, especially mothers, are very high and often unrealistic.

The last quotation, "If you want to leave the house whenever you feel like it, you get a dog, not a kid," reinforces the themes of perfectionism and the excessive demands placed on mothers. It is judgmental, as if denying a mother's right to personal space or individual needs. Overall, the quote illustrates how a culture of hard work and extreme social expectations can burden mothers, triggering feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear of failing to meet impossible standards.

This chapter offers a thorough examination and synthesis of the ways in which hustle culture shapes the representation of parenting in Jessamine Chan's 2022 novel *The School for Good Mothers*. Following the story's chronological progression, the conversation centers on Frida Liu, the protagonist, who views motherhood as a place of resistance, discipline, guilt, and worry. Her story represents the struggle of women who are ensnared in the neoliberal ideology of perfectionism, where production takes the place of emotional authenticity and care becomes a metric of value. Frida Liu's inner dialogue and the situations she experiences capture the conflict between professional pressures, societal

perfection ideals, and the protagonist's emotional breakdown. The following two quotations demonstrate how our hurried culture has transformed compassion into a judgmental yardstick of value.

This morning, she didn't shower or wash her face. She worried the neighbors would complain about the crying. She should have closed the back door. She should have come home right away. She should never have left. She should have remembered the le in the rst place. Or gone in over the weekend to grab it. She should have met her original deadline. She should have told the o cers that she can't lose this job. That Gust hired a mediator to determine child support. He didn't want to waste money on legal fees. With Gust's rewarding but poorly paid position, his student-loan debt, and her earning potential, and the fact that custody would be shared, the mediator suggested that Gust give her \$500 a month, not nearly enough to support her and Harriet, especially since she gave up her job in New York. She couldn't bring herself to ask him for more. She didn't ask for alimony. (Chan's 2022, p. 10)

The quotation highlights the social pressures that shape Frida Liu's experience of motherhood and the emotional strain that accompanies it. Her reluctance to take a bath, coupled with her constant worry that her child's crying might disturb the neighbors, reflects the persistent stress and hyper-awareness she endures in her everyday life as a mother. The repeated use of the phrase "She should have..." serves to intensify the sense of guilt she carries, reinforcing how she continually second-guesses her choices and feels compelled to meet unrealistic standards of "good mothering." This narrative technique allows readers to step into Frida's internal world, effectively conveying her anxiety and the overwhelming burden of societal expectations. By presenting her thoughts in this way, the author enables the audience to directly feel Frida's emotional turmoil and understand how external judgement contributes to her self-blame and psychological distress.

The quotation reveals that the ideology of hard work, often associated with hustle culture, places intense and unrealistic expectations on mothers. It compels them to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously, such as managing the household, performing well at work, and fulfilling childcare duties. This overwhelming pressure creates an environment in which mothers are expected to excel in every role without rest or the option of failing. The deliberate repetition of certain words and the use of short, fragmented sentences amplify the emotional weight of Frida's guilt, making her internal struggle and sense of inadequacy feel more immediate and pressing to the reader. Through this narrative style, the text emphasizes how constant pressure to meet excessive standards can gradually erode a mother's emotional resilience, leading to significant psychological strain.

Ultimately, the quotation shows that the build-up of these demands burdens mothers physically and mentally, affecting their overall well-being and sense of self-worth.

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2. Discussion

The discussion in this chapter highlights how Frida's psychological journey reflects the broader tensions experienced by mothers as they navigate the conflicting pressures of feminism, neoliberalism and the norms of intensive mothering. Frida's initial internalisation of neoliberal values such as the belief that a 'good mother' must constantly self-optimize, work excessively, and achieve quantifiable success reveals how capitalist standards infiltrate the private sphere of motherhood.

As Frida becomes more aware of the system's injustices, her evolving perception reflects a gradual shift from compliance to resistance, aligning with Tong's feminist ethics of care and Petersen's burnout theory. The strict re-education centre serves as a metaphor for how patriarchal and neoliberal institutions police women's bodies, emotions and parental roles under the guise of 'improvement'.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The discussion in this chapter highlights how Frida's psychological journey reflects the broader tensions experienced by mothers as they navigate the conflicting pressures of feminism, neoliberalism and the norms of intensive mothering. Frida's initial internalisation of neoliberal values — such as the belief that a 'good mother' must constantly self-optimize, work excessively, and achieve quantifiable success — reveals how capitalist standards infiltrate the private sphere of motherhood. Her subsequent feelings of guilt and self-blame following state intervention demonstrate the extent to which she has internalised societal judgement, exemplifying Roxane Gay's feminist perspective that women are conditioned to hold themselves accountable for systemic failures. Through this lens, Frida's early emotional turmoil is not merely a sign of personal weakness, but evidence of a social structure that ties women's worth to unrealistic, productivity-based standards of caregiving.

As Frida becomes more aware of the system's injustices, her evolving perception reflects a gradual shift from compliance to resistance, aligning with Tong's feminist ethics of care and Petersen's burnout theory. The strict re-

education centre serves as a metaphor for how patriarchal and neoliberal institutions police women's bodies, emotions and parental roles under the guise of 'improvement'. Frida's turn towards self-reflection, emotional autonomy and eventual defiance suggests that reclaiming one's maternal identity is a form of resistance against oppressive cultural narratives. Her transformation shows that motherhood in a neoliberal society is a political battleground as well as a personal role, where emotional labour, care work and identity formation are acts of survival and empowerment..



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