Exploring Trauma, Memory, and Identity Formation in 'The School for Good Mothers' by Jessamine Chan

Ridha Rouabhia[1*] and Amro Makhlouf[2]
[1]Université Blida 2 Ali Lounici, Algeria
[2]Yahia Fares University of Medea, Algeria
baraa12400@gmail.com[1] and rectorat@univ-medea.dz[2]
*correspondence: baraa12400@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT
This article examines the links between trauma and memory and implications for identity in Jessamine Chan's novel, The School for Good Mothers. It describes how intergenerational trauma impacts Frida (the protagonist) and her interactions with Harriet from the respective perspectives of psychoanalytic trauma theory and pluralistic trauma models. Based on the analysis, Frida's identity and behaviours are significantly shaped by unresolved childhood trauma and social expectations related to motherhood. Hence, the novel critiques institutional approaches to dealing with trauma that rely on surveillance and standardisation as opposed to identifying and resolving deeper psychological issues. For example, the continued monitoring presented in the novel is a form of ongoing traumatisation and mirrors contemporary concerns about privacy, autonomy, and mental health. This research contributes to the field of trauma studies by focusing on trauma as a complexity of experiences based on individual experiences, traumatic experiences within family systems, and external societal pressures, particularly in the experiences of mothers. Lastly, this research illustrates, through multiple lenses, why trauma should be treated individually and how universalised approaches to trauma are limited at best when addressing complex trauma in institutional contexts.

Keywords: identity formation, institutional abuse, intergenerational trauma, psychoanalytic model, societal expectations

INTRODUCTION
Jessamine Chan, a Chinese American writer, came to the United States for higher education and professional opportunities. Chan, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, earned an MFA at Columbia University and has emerged as an important voice in contemporary American literature. A prior book editor for Publishers Weekly, her work has evolved within a complicated sociopolitical context and often examines the confluence of cultural identity, institutionalised power, and motherhood. Although her work spans many themes, it centres on evaluating the social experiences of individuals through the lens of power dynamics, particularly as they affect women and immigrants. Chan's debut novel, The School for Good Mothers (2022), stands out for its distinctive dystopian approach to examining motherhood and state control, earning widespread critical acclaim for its innovative narrative techniques and unflinching social critique. Her fiction involves a voyeuristic inspection of societal norms, a nuanced exploration of unfamiliar social groups, and an interrogation of institutional authority. Her quest to illuminate human experiences is reflected in her plots and characters, which investigate topics with extensive social depth and emotional resonance (Coulter, 2022).

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Her literary approach offers new insights into social topics. Jessamine's work makes women's privacy visible, how marital status categorises individuals and the interests of motherhood focus solely on female characters. Women are depicted in historical backdrops and narratives. Controversy surrounding essentialist fiction and foundational research challenges its validity as a specialised tool. Jessamine's literature suggests essentialism in her analysis and facilitates discussion due to the complexity of each context. Despite this, the sphere of motherhood remains a subject that lacks an exploration of maternal statuses. Jessamine contemplates the motherhood of characters, processing numerous facets while considering the scope's performance.

Jessamine Chan's novel *The School for Good Mothers* tells a story of trauma and memory. A key aspect of the novel is the exploration of the protagonist's internal and external life regarding her new life status as a mother and the constant observation by the state. In this context, this paper seeks to discuss the way Chan presents trauma and memory in the novel and how the two literary devices enhance the picture of the main character and her struggle. Subsequently, trauma and memory cannot be overlooked when analysing the layers of character development and the novel's organisation. Trauma, as exemplified by Frida, becomes more than an individual psychological issue; it is also a social problem that plays out through oppression and cultural gender roles (Walker, 2022). On the other hand, memory plays an essential role in constructing the characters' personalities and their relation to the environment (Luckhurst, 2013). Analysing these topics, this work aims to reveal the underlying messages behind the work and outlines the role of the novel in current discourses surrounding trauma and memory.

Several key questions guide this research: How are trauma and memory represented in Chan's work? What narrative techniques have been employed in this text to create or signal these themes? What signals, signs, and symptoms do the characters of the story portray, and in what way are they affiliated with social problems? To explore these questions, this study examines how Chan portrays the psychological impact of institutional surveillance on motherhood through the character of Frida, analysing how her past traumas manifest in her present behaviours and interactions with her daughter Harriet. In answering these questions, the strategy of close reading is chosen as the main type of analysis of the novel. The current findings are discussed with reference to theoretical underpinnings drawn from psychoanalytic theory, pluralistic theories of traumatic memory, and memory studies.

This work's significance lies in its examination of how contemporary literary texts engage with trauma theory within the specific context of maternal identity and institutional power structures. While numerous studies have analysed trauma in fiction, few have explored how surveillance-based institutional control becomes a mechanism of ongoing traumatisation. This study provides new insights by examining how Chan's novel illustrates the failure of standardised approaches to complex psychological trauma for mothers within the parameters of race and class. The article uses psychoanalytic and pluralistic trauma models in examining the contemporary text to help bridge the gap between traditional literary analysis and current psychological understandings of trauma, thus allowing a more nuanced understanding of intergenerational trauma through the lens of culturally entrenched systems of oppression. Further, the article aims to demonstrate how Chan's work offers a commentary that moves beyond an individual psychological analysis to comment on the broader institutional talks of maternal "failure" and rehabilitation for their purported failure.

Trauma theory

Trauma is not just an occurrence in the past, but rather the trace of the experience on the mind, brain, and body, which reconstructs how the human organism will adapt to survive in the present moment (Van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma studies have developed a view that acknowledges the complexity of the psychological, social, and biological factors that follow in

the wake of traumatic events and experiences (Carlisle, 2024; Chouliara et al., 2024). Trauma is now also understood as having a radiating effect beyond the individual and is not just about the individual but about entire communities and generations of people affected by it (Li et al., 2023; Pathania, 2024). Trauma has its names: collective trauma, historical trauma, and intergroup conflict. Art, literature, and music have the power to process trauma (Malchiodi, 2020) and they do provide a way to find a language when words are not adequate and to externalise what is happening inside. When a survivor creates it, it may help them to process their experiences and find meaning among the senseless (Parsons et al., 2024; Dalal & Srivastava, 2023).

Understanding psychological trauma, the linguistic expressions of trauma, and the role of memory in the formation of individual and cultural identity is one of the key concerns in trauma studies (Hunt, 2010; Eyerman, 2019). The field of trauma studies utilises psychoanalytic theories of trauma paired with frameworks such as post-structural, socio-cultural, and post-colonial theory to interpret and analyse the impact of extreme experience on memory and identity. Trauma is typically characterised as a deeply disruptive experience that fundamentally shifts an individual's emotional life and worldview (Yadav et al., 2024). The study of trauma deals with the complicated psychic and social aspects of how trauma shapes our understanding of experience, how we talk about trauma with others, and finally, slice and communicate trauma in language (Balaev, 2018).

Psychoanalytic theories on the causes and repercussions of trauma go back to the nineteenth century. Breuer and Freud's early writings, particularly *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), and Freud's later work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), are exemplary instances still shaping what literary trauma critics engage in today. Freud holds that the hysterical condition is a result of any repressed experience relating to sexual violence. As Breuer and Freud state, "the original incident could not be traumatic per se but became so through its remembrance" (1955, p.191). Talking about cure or abreaction is fundamental for understanding past implications and freeing themselves from their symptoms. Only after a latency period or deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) does one understand a traumatic event with respect to its previous implications and effects. A current happening may remind an individual about something that occurred long before, making him/her unveil it (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p.192).

In the 1990s, there was a surge of scholarship exploring the concept of trauma and its role in literature and society. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, among others, popularised the idea that trauma reveals the contradictions within language and experience. Caruth's traditional model of trauma sees it as an event that shatters identity, thus eluding direct linguistic representation. Trauma as an unassimilated event remains outside normal memory and narrative representation, fragmenting identity (Mambrol, 2018). This model also supports trans-historical trauma, thereby linking both personal and collective traumatic experiences (Balaev, 2018).

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996), Caruth interprets Freud's theories on trauma in terms of the referential limitedness of language and history. What she argues is that "latency and dissociation associated with trauma are factors that disrupt our understanding or representation of traumatic experiences" (Caruth, 1996, p.17). Traumatic events are consistently recognised through interrupted referentiality, pointing towards the past by recurring absence. Due to trauma's dissociative character and linguistic oddity, it often refuses to be narrated, which adversely affects consciousness as well as memory (Caruth, 1996).

The pluralistic model of trauma, which serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study alongside psychoanalytic theory, challenges the traditional Caruthian framework by emphasising trauma's structural and cultural dimensions. This theory recognises several narrative expressions and goes beyond merely looking at pathological fragmentation and dissociation, suggesting instead that "traumatic experiences may establish new kinds of relations between experience, language and knowledge" (Balaev, 2018, p.362). The pluralistic

model also claims that traumatic memory, though disruptive, does not necessarily stop the past from being integrated into identity. This perspective emphasises how trauma memories emerge in the interplay of internal and external forces; hence, trauma memory provides direct and indirect knowledge about trauma. It challenges trauma's fundamental unspeakability and highlights the significance of culture and history when recovering narratives (Balaev, 2018). Trauma studies have changed the traditional Caruthian model that emphasises trauma's unspeakability for a more pluralistic model that recognises the variety of narrative forms and cultural contexts, as well as trauma's role in the formation of identity and memory. These changes enable more understanding of how trauma can be expressed and what it means for oneself or society as a whole. By applying both psychoanalytic and pluralistic frameworks to Chan's novel, this study examines how personal, intergenerational, and institutional trauma shapes maternal identity and behaviour.

Trauma and memory in literature

Numerous scholarly works have investigated questions of trauma and memory in contemporary literature and their treatment in various cultural and historical contexts (Pires & Ricarte, 2024). Armie and Membrive (2023), for example, include several studies on female trauma in their collection that examine "wounds that have been inflicted on the body, mind, and spirit of women in Ireland" (p. 3). In their collection, studies demonstrate how contemporary literature reconciles tradition with modernity, dispels myths, and breaks silences surrounding women's experiences, offering pathways for renegotiating gender roles and healing past traumas. Similarly, Nassif (2024) examines trauma and memory in Lebanon's Post-War Novel, focusing on Rabee Jaber's works. His study defines trauma as "a cultural motif that Jaber employs to stress how much the past affects present affairs" (p. 17). It demonstrates how fiction can give voice to trauma survivors and explores the representation of 'invisible histories' within specific political-historical contexts.

Similarly, Berry (2016) explores trauma and memory in John Banville's Frames Trilogy. He demonstrates how "traumatic memory in the text operate[s] at both content and form levels," showing that the writing process functions as a subconscious therapeutic exercise (p. 42). This approach differs from analyses that treat Banville's work primarily through aesthetic or philosophical lenses.

While scholarship on trauma and memory in literature continues to grow, there remains a significant gap in the academic study of these themes in Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers*. Unlike works focused on war trauma or historical violence, Chan's novel presents a distinctive examination of institutional and gendered trauma specifically experienced by mothers under surveillance. This study addresses this gap by analysing how trauma and memory function within Chan's narrative, particularly in relation to contemporary standards of motherhood and institutional power. By applying both psychoanalytic and pluralistic models to this text, this research contributes new perspectives on how trauma operates at the intersection of maternal identity, state control, and intergenerational memory.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative psychoanalytical analysis of Jessamine Chan's novel *The School for Good Mothers* to examine the representation of trauma and memory. Several key steps can be distinguished in implementing this methodology. First, the analytical process involved selecting relevant textual segments from the novel that demonstrated trauma manifestations and memory processes. As Caruth (1996) suggests, trauma narratives often reveal themselves through "interruptions, gaps, and repetitions" (p. 7), so passages were chosen that exhibited these characteristics. Close reading was employed following Freud's method of analysing "the associative threads that connect seemingly disparate elements" (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p. 174). This approach revealed recurring motifs and patterns that illuminate how Chan constructs a narrative of trauma through Frida's experiences.

Second, the study incorporated two primary theoretical frameworks: the psychoanalytic trauma theory and the pluralistic model of trauma. Psychoanalytic theory, drawing on Freud's concept of Nachträglichkeit or "deferred action" (Breuer & Freud, 1955, p. 192), provided insights into how Frida's past experiences resurface and influence her present behaviours. As LaCapra (2014) notes, "Trauma is not simply an event that took place in the past, but is an event that continues to affect the present through unresolved mourning" (p. 89). The pluralistic Model, as articulated by Balaev (2018), extended thinking by considering "how cultural and historical contexts shape traumatic experiences and how those experiences are expressed" (p. 365). This dual framework facilitated the investigation of both the internal psychological and external sociocultural factors that affected Frida's trauma.

Third, a contextual analysis via character study and narrative structure was also performed. The character study examined Frida Liu's experiences and behaviour with a specific emphasis on what van der Kolk (2014) refers to as "the body's physical response to unresolved trauma" (p. 67). The analysis investigated how Frida's experiences of trauma influenced her behaviour and her relationship with her daughter Harriet and institutional authorities. Additionally, the narrative structure analysis examined how Chan uses what Whitehead (2004) calls "stylistic techniques that mirror the effects of trauma" (p. 84) involving temporal disruptions and shifting between the past and present to re-create trauma's effects on memory and perception. Through this combination of methodological approaches, this study offers an integrated analysis of how Chan depicts trauma and memory and how they shape character development and narrative structure in *The School for Good Mothers*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reading of *The School for Good Mothers* reveals important findings about trauma and memory in relation to identity, specifically in terms of motherhood and as a consequence of institutional control. The findings can be looked at from other trauma theory approaches: psychoanalytical and pluralistic, which allows for a rich multi-layered analysis of Chan's account. The depictions of trauma in the novel operate on an individual, intergenerational, and social level, which reflects current trauma theory in that it is a multi-layered phenomenon with many influencing factors. Frida demonstrates how personal history, family dynamics, and social norms converge to create this layered traumatic experience. Supporting this pluralistic model of trauma is the earlier notion that wider sociocultural factors are influential on an individual's trauma experience. Psychoanalytic perspectives are also well supported by the relationship between memory and identity depicted in the novel.

Throughout the novel, Frida’s self-identity is continually shaped and reshaped by her childhood memories and her experiences as a mother. The cyclical nature of this process – where past traumas inform present behaviours, which in turn create new traumatic experiences – aligns with the psychoanalytic concept of repetition compulsion. Specifically, one can view certain aspects of the way Chan portrays the school’s approach to the children as a critique of reductionist approaches to trauma treatment. In this respect, the institution’s focus on surface-level corrections and standardised solutions proves ineffective in addressing the deep-seated nature of psychological trauma. This interpretation thus highlights the limitations of purely behavioural or cognitive models of trauma treatment; it implies that therapy for trauma needs to consider the individual’s history, societal pressures, and psychological factors.

Therefore, this constant surveillance illustrated in the novel can be considered a form of ongoing traumatisation. This is concurrent with today’s definition of trauma, which not only refers to one-off incidents but also ongoing, persistent stressors. The monitoring realistically reflects people’s concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the psychological effects of living in a society where they are under constant watch.

With regard to trauma, the novel discusses social pressure towards motherhood, which can be read as a commentary on how cultural narratives and expectations can be sources of trauma. This understanding constitutes the basis for the feminist and sociocultural perspectives

on trauma as it focuses on power relations and cultural context in trauma survivors' lives. The arguments disputing universal solutions about how one responds to trauma or deals with complex psychological issues can be viewed as a call for better individualised approaches and methods for helping individuals experiencing trauma. In this interpretation, one opposes providing simple solutions to some of the most complex psychological questions.

Psychoanalytic theory, which deals with the transmission of unresolved psychological issues across generations, is also illustrated in the novel by showing how intergenerational trauma influences subsequent generations. This theory corresponds with epigenetics, where early experiences or adverse experiences of one's grandparents and parents may lead to biological repercussions in their offspring.

Memory and identity formation

According to the psychoanalytic model, trauma can be passed down from one generation to another: individuals can be traumatised without being exposed directly to the initial traumatic event. This is evident in Chan's reference to intergenerational trauma:

> "Had Frida been abandoned as a child? Was abandoning Harriet the result of intergenerational trauma?" (Chan, 2022, p. 136).

Her unresolved past influences the character Frida, and her fear and guilt about her mother's mistakes haunt her and create anxieties that shape her identity and actions. From a pluralistic model perspective that considers broader sociocultural contexts, Frida is also affected by the societal expectations and norms internalised towards motherhood in addition to her personality history. The latter further complicates her identity formation and exacerbates feelings of trauma and guilt.

Frida's identity and behaviours are profoundly affected by trauma:

> "Ms Gibson said her mother should have sought help – see a therapist, found a support group. Had she been a better mother, she would have taken better care of herself, and thus, been more available to her child" (Chan, 2022, p. 237).

This is evidenced by Frida's state and behaviour, symbolising how trauma affects the mind. She experiences a collapse, and her repressed memories and unresolved trauma manifest in her actions. Society has a major influence on certain aspects of motherhood, and its impact can be significant as seen in the case of Frida. Her perceived failure is not only personal but also due to societal judgment, as advocated by the pluralistic model. It illustrates how external pressures impact her trauma and identity issues.

Moreover, a complex interplay exists between memory and identity:

> "Ms. Gibson said, 'Maybe you would have turned out differently if you'd had a sibling. Clearly, you wanted something your mother couldn't give you'" (Chan, 2022, p. 237).

A prime source of Frida's identity, according to psychoanalysis, is past failure in her relationship with her daughter, creating a cycle of guilt and fear. Therefore, from the pluralistic model's perspective, Frida's self-esteem and anxiety regarding failure can be attributed to social influences. These pressures amplify her trauma and perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and judgment.

Representation of trauma

Chan critiques contemporary societal norms through her novel, particularly her protagonist's experiences of trauma. She touches on both the psychological and socio-political

dimensions. Metaphorically, she symbolises the superficial understanding and perception of trauma by the oppressive system Frida is subjected to:

> "The dent is only a surface wound and the technical department is overtaxed and leaving the dent will help Frida think about consequences" (Chan, 2022, p. 137).

For true healing, the psychoanalytic model stresses the importance of addressing underlying psychological issues. The surface-level corrections advocated by the institution overlook the deeper, more complex aspects of trauma. The societal structures fail to address the root causes of trauma, and this is evident in the institution's superficial treatment of Frida's trauma, which prioritises efficiency over genuine healing and understanding.

The school employs artificial and coercive methods:

> "Ms. Knight explains the rules of conduct. 'You're expected to treat the state's property with care... With empathy. Empathy is one of the cornerstones of our program'" (Chan, 2022, p. 71).

This can be interpreted through the psychoanalytic model as a reflection of trauma that is profoundly personal and resistant to superficial solutions. Genuine emotional connections cannot be forced or standardised. The cultural narratives impose unrealistic standards on mothers and cause trauma. The institution's methods undermine natural maternal bonds and replace genuine interactions with regimented, superficial standards. Furthermore, Chan highlights the psychological impact of living under surveillance:

> "Cameras will be installed in every room, Frida learns, except the bathroom... They'll also inspect the site of the incident... The state will collect footage from a live video feed" (Chan, 2022, p. 21).

For the psychological model, constant surveillance generates internalised stress and anxiety and exacerbates Frida's trauma and sense of inadequacy.

CONCLUSION

Jessamine Chan's novel offers a profound exploration of trauma, memory, and identity through the lens of motherhood and institutional control. This study demonstrates how Chan portrays trauma as both intergenerational and socially constructed, revealing how Frida's unresolved past experiences and internalised societal expectations shape her maternal identity and behaviours. Through the dual theoretical frameworks of psychoanalytic and pluralistic trauma models, this analysis shows how the novel critiques institutional approaches that employ surveillance and standardised interventions as ineffective responses to complex psychological trauma. The constant monitoring depicted in the novel functions as a form of ongoing traumatisation, reflecting contemporary concerns about privacy, autonomy, and institutional power.

Unlike previous literary works focusing on historical or war trauma, Chan's distinctive contribution lies in her examination of gendered, institutional trauma specific to mothers, highlighting the need for individualised approaches rather than universal solutions. Through its nuanced portrayal of trauma's psychological and sociopolitical dimensions, *The School for Good Mothers* deepens our understanding of how trauma shapes identity formation in contemporary contexts, particularly at the intersection of motherhood and institutional power.

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